

## LIVING OUR PRINCIPLES

Theme talk for the Cascadia Conference, February 14 2004, by the  
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"In the beginning was the word", so the Gospel tells us, and speaking for myself, this was literally true of my history as a Unitarian. I first became involved in this movement of ours through the written word before I had ever to my knowledge met a real-live member; it was only later that the word became flesh when I made contact with the nearest minister.

I suspect that this is a rather unusual sequence even among us, and it's certainly uncommon in other religious circles. The more usual mode of entry is through a circle of people who belong to the faith in question ~ in other words, by way of persons, not principles. Furthermore, most faiths focus chiefly upon a person whose lengthened shadow that faith may be said to be ~ Jesus Christ, Gautama the Buddha, Mohammed, Zoroaster, Baha'ullah. Even sub-divisions within the faith follow Luther or Calvin or Wesley, and so on. There are faiths which have no single founder, such as Judaism or Hinduism or Shinto, but they tend to be held together by a close-knit community of persons, usually ethnic, rather than by a set of principles. It's a commonplace observation in Jewish circles that where two Jews are gathered, you have three opinions.

In this world of the 21st century we Unitarians or UUs find ourselves in an ambiguous place in this scene. There was a time in the not too distant past when we too claimed to build our faith around a person, and certainly the persecutions that fell to our lot in the past often forged us into a close-knit community. The emphasis we laid in an earlier set of principles upon "salvation by character", focused back upon the individual person. And when I first became a Unitarian, a neighbour who knew nothing at all about what Unitarians profess thought my move was a good one, because she had once had house-guests for whom she had a high regard as persons, and whom she now remembered to have been Unitarians.

In making the move from following a person to following a set of principles, we have avoided the cult of the founder or leader, going as far as worship at times. But it is also possible to idolize a text, and in recent years I have heard more than one accusation that this has happened to what have come to be called our Seven Principles. They are framed and hung up in our places of worship much in the way that the Stations of the Cross are in a Catholic Church, except that we have only seven while the Catholics have fourteen. The Catholics also have the advantage of being able to depict theirs dramatically, while ours tend to be more abstract ~ which reminds me of what George Santayana once wrote: "The heart cannot feed on thin and elaborate abstractions...it is impossible ... to give a human meaning to vacuous conceptions, or to grow to love the categories of logic, interweaving their image with the actions and emotions of daily life". As I ponder that, I remember that the new religions which tried to do just that during the French and Russian revolutions ~ maybe during the American revolution too ~ ended up at the opposite pole with idolization of persons.

So you see, I approach this whole matter of building a religion around principles rather cautiously. They can be a useful shorthand to point us toward a fuller development of our human potentialities, but once we start bandying abstractions like Truth, Justice, Worth and Dignity too glibly we run into the danger that Edwin Muir signalled when he wrote:

"The word made flesh here is made word again".

Or to put it more positively, let me reach back to what that great Irish Unitarian preacher of the 19th century, John Hamilton Thom, said: "It is not the truth of theory, of agreement, of statement, that gains religious sway over [our] souls: but truth of feeling and action, which comes not in word but in power ~ such truth as Christ had in his mind when he said, 'I am the Truth!'"

But here we run into another danger. Those words of Christ quoted by Thom were understood by him in a universal sense: you or I could say the same thing. But too often they have been interpreted by others in an exclusive sense, as something only Christ could have said. It has been claimed in favour of principles that they have a universal validity, no matter where or when or by whom they are invoked. But again, I wonder whether this is really so. Interpretations are always going to vary according to the context within which people find themselves, and this is true whether we are dealing with persons or with principles. Each new biography of a famous person brings a new interpretation of that person, often differing considerably from previous ones, and certainly this has been the case for persons invested with a religious significance, such as Jesus. But have we totally escaped that by appealing to principles instead of persons? Aren't they capable of being interpreted in greatly differing ways, according to the time and place and cultural setting?

That provides a particular perspective to our gathering here today. Both the UUA and the CUC have embarked upon a process of reviewing the principles to which we say we subscribe, and no one can predict how similar or dissimilar the outcome will be in our two countries. There are those who will say that if we are dealing with principles that are genuinely universal, then the outcome will be very similar, even if there are differences in terminology; indeed, we may both come out with a reaffirmation of the principles as expressed at present. There are others who will point out that even among adherents of the same religious faith, contextual factors may bring about a great difference of interpretation. The worldwide Anglican communion is being torn apart by such differences as I speak.

In some ways the world is growing closer together; in other ways differences seem to be accentuated. Sharing a supposedly common faith does not necessarily bring the outlook of people in different countries into harmony. You may not think this could be a problem in Canadian-American relations. Don't be so sure. One sociological study a few years ago looked at the Mennonites, a religious body which avowedly claims that international boundaries have no relevance whatsoever to its religious outlook. After a detailed examination, the researcher concluded that "the nation is a critical factor even for a group with a sectarian ideology", with "Canadian Mennonites perceiving their American counterparts as assimilated to Americanism, and American Mennonites accusing the Canadian Mennonites of nationalism."

At a broader level, not confined to religious factors, the conclusion of those who have made a detailed study is that the dissimilarity between the social, political and cultural contexts between our

two countries is substantial and growing. This is not the place for going into detail on this question, but if you are interested in following it up, let me refer you to two books by distinguished sociologists who have spent years studying these factors. The first is by an American, Seymour Lipset; his book is called *Continental Divide*, and sub-titled *The Values and Institutions of the United States and Canada*. The second, published only a few months ago, is by a Canadian, Michael Adams, and is called *Fire and Ice*. Let me mention just one little contextual difference Adams quotes which sheds some light on what our churches confront in our two countries. Half a century ago, 60% of Canadians told pollsters they went to church every Sunday, as against 50% of Americans. Today the proportion in the US has fallen from 50% to 42%; in Canada it has fallen from 60% to 22%.

Oh yes, let me add one more little nugget which relates to principles. Adams relays an alleged comment by Noam Chomsky as follows: "Americans have great and noble principles and they go to hell trying to live up to them. Canadians also have great and noble principles, but they go to heaven figuring out ways to get around them."

As I reflect on what I find in these two books, one conclusion that I draw, rightly or wrongly, is that there is a much greater degree of social nonconformity in being a UU in the US than there is in being a Unitarian in Canada. The values we Unitarians in this country can embody in our principles are not as widely removed from the dominant ones in the society in which we live. This may make our role a little more comfortable and not quite as challenging, though goodness knows there are enough issues in Canadian society to challenge any lively religious conscience.

Come back now to our current situation as co-religionists. For the present, at any rate, we have a common set of principles, so any thinking about living our principles has to take them as our point of departure. Those principles, of course, have their history, and however little else they may have in common with the Nicene Creed, they were, like it, the product of a political process that was not without its heated moments. In fact, many of us who were around at that time were amazed that they emerged at all, for we had no Emperor Constantine to enforce a consensus. I well remember the General Assembly of the UUA which met in Vancouver in 1983, and considered a draft of principles to replace the original ones of 1961 (which just about everyone agreed were in need of restatement). That discussion ended in complete deadlock, and many people went away from the Assembly in despair of ever finding a sufficient degree of consensus to adopt any statement of principles. There were strong contending parties within the Association, each of which wanted a statement that would have been unacceptable to the others, while there was a not inconsiderable number of hyper-individualists who really didn't want any principles at all. Rather than standing for something, they would prefer to fall for anything.

It was a UU miracle that within a year that whole scene was turned around by careful diplomacy, and the resulting relief when the present principles were adopted was so great that it accounts for much of the veneration they received during the ensuing years. I doubt if Moses had greater acclamation when he came down from Sinai with the Ten Commandments.

But like the Ten Commandments, they were the product of a particular time and place, and though some people might like to think them valid for all times and places, the history of all such statements in the past shows that new occasions teach new duties and time makes ancient good uncouth.

What shifts have there been in the past two decades that have to be reckoned with as we look at our principles today? For me, at any rate, the most striking one has been the rise of our ecological consciousness, our awareness of the primacy of the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part ~ a phrase that went into the principles right at the end and almost as an afterthought. All six of the preceding principles move within the purely human sphere, dealing with our vision of the nature of the individual person and her or his relationship to the wider society at various levels, from the local congregation to the world community. Well, there is a reference to "spiritual growth", and if you agree with me that spirituality is a near-synonym for connectedness, then there may here be an opening for a mysticism that goes beyond an encapsulation in the exclusively human, but that is only a hint.

When the British Unitarians set about rewriting their principles, the product had to be approved by the Charity Commissioners before they were recognized as a religion for tax purposes. I suspect that if our principles had had to go through a similar process, we might well have been turned down as deficient in specifically religious content. Or it may be that the addition of the sources upon which we draw, while not part of the principles themselves, might have averted that.

Still, if we are talking about living our principles, we have to ask what is the cash value in practice of what we say in words, and I'm not sure just how well we are able to do this all down the line. Take for instance the principle that speaks of "a free and responsible search for truth and meaning". The "search for truth" has always reminded me, perhaps irreverently, of Diogenes going around with his lantern in broad daylight looking for an honest man. Like Pontius Pilate, I have to ask, what is "truth"? Is it really something out there that one can go in search of, or is it a relationship that one becomes conscious of in a quite different way? And is something of the same sort true of "meaning"?

I respond better to what was written by that enfant terrible among modern theologians, Don Cupitt. "To this day", he writes, "we still try to extend the application of words like meaning, truth, fact and knowledge beyond the domain of language, where they belong, and map them on to the world itself.... our yearning for an ultimate Truth of things and meaning of life that hasn't been made by us by our own hard work ... is an empty yearning.... truth always involves an 'interior' journey, and in such a case the destination simply is the change brought about in us through the step-by-step making of the journey. Truth has always to be made or, as the Bible itself puts it, 'done'."

Let me comment briefly on one or two of the other principles as they are formulated at present. The first one of all affirms 'the inherent worth and dignity of each person'. If you look in the Oxford dictionary, you find 'worth' defined as 'the relative value of a thing in respect of its qualities or the estimation in which it is held' ~ or, again, 'the character or standing of a person in respect of moral and intellectual qualities, especially, high personal merit or attainment'. It's not just outsiders looking in, but many of our own members, that I have heard querying the applicability of terms like worth and dignity to Genghis Khan or Adolf Hitler or Idi Amin, or in this country to Paul Bernardo, who did such unspeakable things to the unfortunate teenage schoolgirls who fell into his clutches.

But we need also to note that a word like 'worth' is a comparative term, not an absolute one. It admits of degrees. If I take a ring for a jeweller to examine, and ask, "How much is it worth?", I may be disappointed but not bewildered if I get the response, "Not very much!" By the same token, the jeweller would not be amazed to hear me say, "It's worth a lot to me because it has been in my family for generations." In a famous passage, Thomas Carlyle, speaking of the conventional forms of religion, wrote that we see people "attain to almost all degrees of worth or worthlessness under each or any of them." For him, you note, not only was worth a matter of degree; he also concurred with the dictionary definition I quoted in maintaining that it was something attained, not something inherent. But he carefully avoided saying that anyone was completely worthless. There are other questions that can be asked about a person's worth. In whose eyes? Mine? Those of society generally? God's? Each of these perspectives could come up with a different answer.

There is another dimension too that can't be avoided if we are to grapple with this subject seriously. The people I listed a minute ago are not generally categorized as 'worthless'. The term used is 'evil'. We tend to think of evil not just as a deficiency in worth, but as something sinister, active and powerful. It has been a stock accusation against our form of religion that it has not dealt adequately with the question of evil, and that word does not appear in our principles, though it does occur in what we list as the sources of our living tradition, which may be regarded as a set of 'whereas'es to the principles. The reference there is to "words and deeds of prophetic women and men who challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil". Such persons are singled out as examples for us and therefore of great worth, challenging us too to confront structures of evil. But where did those structures of evil come from? How did they get there? We can scarcely suppose that the persons who raised them were themselves totally uncontaminated by the evil they embodied in the structures. And if they were not, how does this combine with their inherent worth and dignity?

These are deep questions. Whole walls could be lined with books on the subject, and obviously we can't go more adequately into it now. All I wanted to point out is that in reaffirming or revising our principles it would be superficial to ignore such questions. And I want to add that here too is a field in which differences in national context might result in a different approach. For instance, one of the repeated assertions I heard from the American side of the border after 9/11 was that the whole world had changed. I'm sure that for many Americans it did. For the rest of the world, it didn't. We were shocked, yes, but not surprised. This was one more in the long series of evils perpetrated around the world. Speaking for myself, I reflected that my whole world changed as long ago as 1940, when I stood outside my home and watched the waves of enemy bombers surging across the sky, signalling the end of the illusion of security behind what Shakespeare had called a moat against the envy of less happier lands.

Time does not allow examination in depth of all the principles, but I hope I have said enough in that regard to indicate that if they are indeed to provide a guide for living, we owe it to ourselves to enter into such an examination. I want to move on now to look for a moment at what I called the 'whereas'es to the principles, namely our listing of sources. I don't find as many points to quibble over there, and I do believe that it was the inclusion of these that enabled us to get through the political process of adopting the principles in the first place. This raises what I feel to be a fascinating

insight into how we establish our identity, which after all is what the principles are really all about. What we are saying is that as a movement we are what we are because of the various influences that have moulded us, historically speaking.

In a sense, it's as though I were to identify who I am by saying that among my ancestors were Europeans, Africans, Japanese and members of Canada's First Nations. I could explore all these traditions as part of my inheritance, and I could also say that if more of my ancestors came from one source rather than another, then that source is likely to be dominant in determining my identity. In these days many of us are in fact eager to explore our own family tree.

Is it really here that we find our identity as Unitarians or UUs, rather than in any set of principles? A good case could be made for this, despite the fact that, unlike members of most religious bodies, only a few of us can claim a genealogical ancestry within the movement going back over the generations. I remember reading in the autobiography of the poet Herbert Read how he discovered that the point of view he had come to adopt in life was more or less identical with what was classically expressed in the Chinese Taoist tradition, and yet, he said, in view of where he was born and educated, and all the influences that had made him what he was, he felt it would be absurd to describe himself as a Taoist. He belonged within the Western tradition, however unorthodox a member of that family he might be, and whatever affinities he might feel with the world-view arrived at by members of a very different culture.

To me this way of looking at one's identity seems well worth considering, in spite of the personal history with which I began. Yes, it was an attraction to the principles, the ideas articulated by Unitarians that first drew me to investigate this movement of ours, with which I had previously had no acquaintance whatsoever. "In the beginning was the word", but later I came to feel the full force of Martin Buber's pithy phrase, "In the beginning is relation". It was a community, not an ideology, that I was really seeking. I found a community within which I was accepted and within which I was given room to go on growing. I look back gratefully to the persons within that community who thus accepted me and encouraged my personal and spiritual growth. I was adopted into a family, and proceeded to make myself familiar with the family tree. History and biography were at least as much a part of the intellectual background of this as philosophy and theology, though I was imperfectly aware of that at the time.

I say I was adopted by the family, as each of us who came into this movement of ours from the outside was adopted. It's not altogether an easy process; we each of us bring far more of our past into it than we are usually aware. Our changing identity is wrought by an amalgam of influences from principles and from persons, and the first can never be separated from the second. That is why, although I share Herbert Read's feeling of affinity with the Taoist orientation toward life, I like him could not realistically call myself a Taoist; there is room for that orientation within the family into which I have been adopted. A change of whole culture is more of an adventure than I wish to undertake, though I respect those who are willing to invest the immense amount of work required to enter into such a process.

So in conclusion, as we enter into the process of redefining principles, I want to urge that we never lose our feeling for the living tradition such principles set out to describe, a tradition composed of persons from whom we find respect, support, acceptance and love.