

The Principles Project
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“Sing out praises for the journey, pilgrims, we, who carry on, searchers in the soul’s deep yearnings, like our forebears in their time.” The hymn we just sang is a quintessential UU hymn – new words to a traditional tune. Words about what? The religious quest. Words by whom?”
Mark Mosher DeWolfe.

Mark, a fifth generation Universalist, after serving as an interim minister here in 1981 became the minister of the Unitarian Congregation of South Peel. In July 1988 at age 35 Mark died of AIDS. I last saw him a month earlier at the UUA General Assembly giving what energy he had to this faith to which he was deeply committed. His was a gifted life cut short.

Ed Ratcliffe, on the other hand, died an old man, but like Mark his passion for our faith never died. His body simply couldn’t keep up with his many interests, and commitments, and undying passion for life. A vigorous life used to the full.

What attracted these two to Unitarian Universalism? Ed became a Unitarian and a member of this congregation in 1949, the year I was born, and 30 years later in 1979, the year I became a minister, he preached a sermon entitled “The Faith of a Continuing Unitarian.” Speaking from this pulpit he explained that at age 20 he “wondered out loud why someone didn’t start a church based on morality, human inspiration, and human needs, rather than worn out myths.” In that sermon Ed went on to ask “what was the essential ingredient of this challenging new religion...?” Rather than answer his own question Ed reviewed the conditions in the 50’s that led to its rapid growth and then he circles around an answer. Praising tolerance he said “we must be open to change.” Being a Humanist he asked “but if we haven’t found the God of history why talk about God at all?” An activist, he was an admirer of activists and went on to list a few, and then said, “we still need an institution where we can know one another, encourage one another and when necessary support one another.” A ‘get it done kind of person’ he had started his own company which became Arriscraft International and its stone now clads the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto, the congregations in Hamilton, Montreal and Winnipeg, and the Canadian Embassy in D.C.; he served as the first Canadian representative on the UUA Board of Trustees, and was first President of CARAL the Canadian Abortion Right Action League. It makes perfect sense that in his sermon Ed would call for “much more emphasis on the positive aspects of work, thrift, honesty, self discipline, love and concern for people.”

When I first read the words “essential ingredients” I thought Ed was referring to our values, but what he ended up emphasizing in the sermon, and not surprisingly, was action. What we had to do was: “support” this institution, “honour our past... and time-honoured virtues,” “welcome others,” “enrich our services,” be “socially active.” Above all, Ed was a man of action.

Preaching nearly 20 years later, Mark, in a sermon entitled “The Core of Our Tradition” [Time to Live: Selected Writings of Rev. Mark Mosher DeWolfe] said, “if you look at Unitarian

Universalists, you see one thousand congregations across North America, each of which has evolved a unique style of congregational life, [and these] might not recognize a common heritage” [yet] “there is something that unites us but it’s not a prayerbook or a hymnal; it’s not a creedal statement. If it’s anything it’s a spirit, a feeling between people, embodied in a style of operating which unites us.” He asked, “If all are so different, what do they have in common?” and then distilled it down to two things.

First, he writes, “is the demand for integrity. Unitarian Universalists seek a wholeness of religious thought.” We want beliefs that we can hold with integrity and that means we don’t have to pretend we believe that which we do not. Convention and tradition for us do suffice; we refuse to be coerced nor will we acquiesce; we must believe.

Second, he identifies “congruity” and writes it is “...the insistence that our lives in the very way we live day to day reflect the high values we hold. Our lives should be congruent with our values.”

I believe there is more to congruity than this. In their sermons both Ed and Mark spoke about their personal faith journeys. Unlike other faith traditions, each of us, as Mark and Ed did, must start with our own story; and what we are seeking are beliefs that are congruent with our experience of life. In every age and for every person that will be a little different, and we insist on a faith that is congruent with our times, our life experience, our beliefs and our values.

In addition, something else that makes Unitarian Universalist different. Like other **Protestants** our forebears were religious protestors who created the Reformation. However, what makes us different is that we have never ceased reforming. Indeed, Mark suggested that our motto should be “*semper reformanda* – always reforming.”

In many ways our religious faith is like any other: It seeks answers to the fundamental question with which life confronts us. Why am I alive and what is its meaning? How do I live a moral life? What is my place in the scheme of things? And what of death? But as I said we are different. For us the answers are not found in a divine persona, or in particular spiritual practice, or in a holy text or doctrinal creed, or in a church hierarchy or sacrosanct tradition, or in a sacred place. And while we have a complex history we have no mythic narrative around which our communal identity has galvanized.

Since we don’t rely upon traditional religious sources of authority, and since we are always questioning, and always reforming, and always seeking congruity, and demanding our beliefs be ones we can hold with integrity what we have is a covenant. And in every generation we must rework this covenant to make it a contemporary reflection of who we are. This requires that we struggle with what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. We endeavor to articulate what this is. We create with language a communal agreement, an evolving covenant; words meant to guide and inspire us so that we might live it out in our lives.

No other faith engages its members in this way. When the UUA was formed in 1961 they first formulated the Purposes and Principles; yet another iteration in continuing process that dated

back to the formation of the Universalist Church in America in 1780 and the American Unitarian Association in 1825. What was adopted in 1961 was soon amended in order to de-genderize it. Then in 1984 after several years of denomination-wide consultation the current Purpose and Principles were adopted.

Our Principles are prefaced with these words: “We, the member congregation of the Unitarian Universalist Association covenant to affirm and promote...” Now 20 years later, when its phraseology has become familiar, what do we do? We are about to re-evaluate them. Do it all yet again. Why? Well, because it is our way. It is the way of a reforming people, a restless, questioning people, a people willing – however difficult – to wrestle with the tension of neither letting the tradition dominate the present or present fads dominate the past.

However, in this particular case we are reexamining what it means to be a UU in the Canadian context because in July 2002 the CUC became largely independent of the UUA. At that time all we did was change the words Unitarian Universalist Association to Canadian Unitarian Council, Canadianized the spelling, and create a “Statement of Principles Task Force.”

Ed Ratcliffe asked, “What was the essential ingredient of this challenging new religion?” Mark DeWolfe asked “what do they have in common?” And now the CUC is asking. This asking, questioning and searching is basic to who we are for we are a process oriented faith. The time has come to look deeper and to again ask, ‘What is our covenant?’ What binds us together? What beliefs do we hold universally? What is unique to us as Canadians? This process will unfold over the next three years and the first step is a workshop that poses some questions for us to consider and respond to. Among the questions posed are these:

What are your deepest yearnings?

What would be missing from your life if there was no UUism, or if you had never encountered it?

What are the shared values and loyalties that bind us together as UU’s in Canada and make us unique?

Once all the responses have been submitted they’ll be collated and reported out in May at the CUC Annual Conference in Edmonton. Having identified our common values and concerns then the Task Force will move on to the next step.

The entire process will take another 2 -3 years and I don’t know what the outcome will be but I have some hunches. I think that we hold the first and last principles so dear and they have become so ingrained in how we think and talk about ourselves that it is hard for me, at least, to imagine us without them.

Although now when I think about our first principle “the inherent worth and dignity of every person” I wonder if we should expand it to include all sentient beings? Reverence for life is how

Albert Schweitzer spoke of it. Indeed, the last principles in which we speak of “the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part” moves in that direction.

I honestly don't know what the outcome will be; no one does. But I get excited at the thought of engaging in the process, reflecting upon these question, listening to other's thoughts and being part of the dialogue. I get excited because I'm curious about what we will discover. I get excited because the process will create a space in which we can be creatively engaged and from which, perhaps, something new will emerge: the expression of our faith for the next generation. What an opportunity, probably the last in my lifetime.

Like Ed Ratcliffe and Mark DeWolfe each of us in on a journey and so is our faith community, and if we sing its praises – as they did - and share our excitement about being part of such a vital, creative, authentic faith, a diverse, supportive and caring community perhaps we will grow, and touch more lives, and become an ever greater influence in shaping a just and humane world.