

**Living Deliberately: Everyday with UU Principles**  
Rev. Kathy Sage Kingston Unitarian Fellowship October 2004

*This sermon was a part of a year long series on the theme for the year at KUF, particularly for the Big Issues/Small Groups. Each month a different "big issue" is presented for discussion in our "small groups". The theme this year was Living Deliberately. This was the first for the year. I removed a couple of the jokes but did leave most of the KUF references. Some in KUF consider themselves "Unitarian" and not "UU". Please know ahead of time it is not as inclusive of "Universalism".*

Henry David Thoreau gave us the phrase Living Deliberately. For two years and two months he lived at Walden Pond. *"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately...to front only the essential facts of life and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I do not wish to live what is not life, living is so dear. Nor do I wish to practice resignation, unless it is quite necessary. I wish to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life."* (Thoreau Walden)

It was easy to pick a theme this year for the Big Issue Small Group series. Living Deliberately evokes our feelings, it engages our thoughtful consideration, and it calls us to action. Most of us have little time in our lives for a Unitarianism that does not engage our every day issues and concerns in a realistic, relevant, and practical manner. Whether we call Unitarianism a religion, a philosophical foundation, our caring community, or "a place where a misfit like me can feel at home" it needs to ring true and clear. Over the next 8 months most first Sundays of the month I will address eight facets of Living Deliberately, and finally in June the topic is Living Spontaneously.

In addition, you can choose to explore these sermons and the issues raised more deeply in Small Groups. There are of course sign-up sheets, for the once a month evening groups that meet in members' homes. Also, on a Wednesday following the sermon there is a drop-in group at 12:30. Come at noon for the monthly Brown Bag Lunch or just come at 12:30 for the discussion. When you sign-up for the regular small groups you have an opportunity to get to know KUFers over 4 months in ways that aren't possible in the coffee hour din and chatter after Services. These groups are open to newcomers as well as members. The noon drop-in session is just that – come as you wish or as the topic interests you.

This month, the Big Issue related to the theme Living Deliberately, asks if the Seven Principles play an important role in how you approach living deliberately daily and practically. I want to skip the easy "yes" response. Even though we have just printed our KUF business card on the CUC version of the Principles and Purposes, I want to challenge the easy reach for the Principles and Purposes card. When asked, just what do Unitarians believe, many times our short answer is that we have different beliefs yet share values that cluster around affirming and promoting a view that raises human yearning for truth, meaning, and dignity to such thoughtful consideration that our actions lead toward justice, equity, and compassion. We go beyond the personal and extend our values to a goal of "world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all." That's quite a statement so it is helpful to have such cards to distribute – we ordered 1,000 so take two or three. But be aware, in sharing these principles we are observed and people will ask, "I'm not afraid of your principles, I'm looking to see what you do (in the name of your principles) as practical application of those lofty ideals." (reference to Holly Near song "I Ain't Afraid" that was the Offertory)

As I look over the phrases in the seven principles, if I could use only two words to sum up the sentiments intended, I could content myself with "living deliberately". Henry David Thoreau's words were penned while living in a simple cabin. He went to question the conventional assumptions about what was worthwhile and asked two questions that stand the test of time. "How much is enough? And, "How do I know what I want?" They were not really questions of the environment, even though his writings have inspired generations of environmentalists. The continent was vast and the resources seemed unlimited. But time and what is worthy of our time and talents seemed important issues for Thoreau. What efforts are worthy of our creativity? Thoreau thought that was a question worth pondering. "Let us spend one day as deliberately as Nature, and

not be thrown off the track by every nutshell and mosquito's wing that falls on the rails," "Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance." In an era when Thoreau thought he would find truth, or reality, he coined the term "living deliberately" and it still points to the intent of how the philosophy of Unitarianism is intended to be put into practical action.

For some the Principles have become as "scripture" and have been applied as creedal test which led Rev. Davidson Loehr, minister of First UU Church of Austin, TX to critique our use of the Seven Principles when he addressed a regional gathering of UU's this past summer. His address, entitled "Why Unitarianism Universalism is Dying" suggests that the principles are a, "weak articulation of the depth of our longing". He suggests that at the time of merger "both Unitarian Christianity and Christian Universalism had mostly exhausted their spirits. In 1961, America's scattered little groups of Unitarians and Universalists didn't want to (and didn't) worship together. Where they did come together, and saw one another often, was in the important secular activity of political action during the middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century." He contends that neither tradition had preserved any of the religious aspects of their heritage and what was brought to the merger were the liberal social policies and while each group could be counted on to support most individual-rights causes, neither group had any common set of religious beliefs. "There was no ontology, no distinctive understanding of the human condition, in a phrase, there was no religious "salvation story" – described as a tradition's understanding of the human condition, its malaise, and its prescription for satisfying the deep yearning that has always marked serious religions, and its sense of how and why living out of this story makes our lives more fulfilling and useful to the larger world."

Lest you think this line of thought applies only south of the border, at our own CUC AGM in Edmonton Ray Drennan presented the annual Confluence Lecture entitled Canadian Unitarianism: An Idea of a Possibility. Drennan suggests that, "Canadian Unitarianism has paralleled Canadian Society, despite our rhetoric. When it was conservative so were we and now we are both mildly liberal." He goes on to say that our theological divergence has all but disappeared, and that our social stances almost parallel the Canadian Council of Catholic Bishops or the United Church of Canada (UCC). I don't totally agree with that, but he does go on like Loehr to emphasize the way we resemble a political agenda more than a religious core, "Although we speak of diversity and embracing respectful engagement, our congregations are for the most part value tribes which promote specific value-laden, liberal agenda or ideologies." He outlines two possibilities, one to become more sharply dissonant, more extreme socially and politically. The other possibility would take us away from being mere social change activists, or a lobby group for liberal values to become "facilitators of cultural transformation". ([http://www.cuc.ca/ministry/drennan\\_confluencelecture.pdf](http://www.cuc.ca/ministry/drennan_confluencelecture.pdf) )

While Loehr criticizes the Principles for lacking in spiritual depth, Drennan suggests that we don't have just seven principles, but an 8<sup>th</sup> and primary principle that commands, "We affirm and promote a respectable image for ourselves at all cost". He too thinks we have squandered our legacy by looking back instead of grappling with what and who we can be today.

Ray's address is on the CUC web site and I encourage you to study his reflections, and converse with him in two weeks when he is here for the Eastern Regional Gathering. He suggests that we stop trying to be a "respectable church, an acknowledged religion". He suggests that the "centre of our movement could become that empty fullness filled with infinite possibilities" Rather than seeking consensus he suggests that content is not the issue, process is. How we hold our beliefs and opinions and exchange them with others is the issue". He would have "our mandate be to protect and to nurture that open space in which deep dialogue and personal transformation could occur."

What would happen in that space? Would we revert to an earlier time of spiritual navel gazing? Drennan suggests a transformative spirituality where Canadian Unitarian Congregations might "boldly move beyond religion altogether and to dare to gather spiritually in a transformative way. Rather than mere social change activists, or a lobby group for liberal values we would become places of personal and cultural transformation.

I don't have enough time to go into the details of Drennan's options – they are on the CUC web site and I commend his thoughtful address. I will pause for a humorous look at the problem of how we create a viable movement out of non-dogmatic openness. (joke omitted)

The challenge of the open centre concerns some of our finest TV theologians. On one episode of *The Simpsons*, the Simpson family attends a church ice cream social, where Lisa is impressed by the many choices of ice cream available. “Wow,” she raves, “look at all these flavors! Blessed Virgin Berry, Command-Mint, Bible Gum...”

“Or,” Reverend Lovejoy says, “if you prefer, we also have Unitarian ice cream.” He hands Lisa an empty bowl.

“There's nothing here,” says Lisa.

“Exactly,” says Lovejoy.

Loehr says that “all the enduring religions of the world have been clear that the treasures of honest religion must be earned, and make the highest demands on us. That's how those traditions raise our sights to see and hear what Lincoln called ‘the better angels of our nature.’” Loehr concludes his argument saying, “I do not believe Unitarian Universalism can be saved. It's too political, too self-absorbed, and too paltry. But I do know that many people are hungry for truths that can set them free, rather than political posturing that merely draws attention to them.” The best he can offer is that we continue to call ourselves to the highest way of being human that we can muster. He contends that we need something more than a “simple starting place” that the principles offer.

Which frankly takes me back to our starting point. The question remains, do the principles offer a practical, relevant tool for living, day by day, week in and week out, when problems abound and when we face life direction questions.

I think it is important to examine the criticism – especially from within – of Unitarianism. But I differ with both of my colleagues. I differ in that I think at KUF we are in some ways already meeting the criticism raised by Loehr that Unitarian congregations are only a political lobby group and have no content that touches the significant questions and life transitions when people stop to look for signposts. And to Ray I said in Edmonton after hearing his talk that I think at KUF we already have gone “beyond religion”, to that open space of creative interchange that holds the possibility of transformation. The Small Groups of our Big Issue Small Groups series are just one of many, many settings at KUF where we do seek to be respectful of differences, listening with openness, and seeking peaceful engagement. We are a congregation where one can experience every 6 weeks times of Shared Silence in the Turn of the Wheel retreat/advance days to nurture strength to meet real life challenges. We are at home and at ease in exploring the process philosophy of Henry Nelson Wieman, whose “creative interchange” is one way of describing the open and relational exploration that Ray describes as post-religious. As a congregation we are equally at home in expressing our concerns for humanity, as Loehr would say, realizing our best shot at creating noble humans ... in the image of our very highest ideals when we share our social concerns and engage in actions – whether they are political, palliative, or caring actions.

In short, I think that Living Deliberately is an apt expression of a “beyond religion” and *un*self-absorbed way for persons who are hungry for truths that can set them free to be fully engaged and supported in the search. Rev. Paul Carnes, former UUA president once stated that within UUism is “a fear of creedalism that is irrational to the point of being dogmatic” (“With Purpose and Principle” ed. Edward Frost, p. 1)

My summary of Loehr's criticisms of the Principles is that he suggests that they are dangerous shortcuts to dogma, lazy shortcuts to ethics, and a weak articulation of the depth of our longings. Certainly they can be misused in those ways. Yet with our intention, those three disasters waiting to happen can be turned into a strategy for everyday living. (joke removed)

We challenge each person to create their own credo (here I stand), to claim their own heresy (here I move beyond religious orthodoxy to the ethic that **I choose** for living deliberately) and name their principles (this is how I will live out what I believe, with the principles I have chosen, to the commitments I make). Loehr and Drennan remind us that whichever side of the border UUism meets on Sunday mornings, while conservative fundamentalist churches are growing in attendance by offering certitudes and a place for the “faithful” – many of the mainline religious Protestant and Catholic churches are also liberal in their social action and also entertaining a home for the “doubtful”. Even the Whig Standard this Saturday on the religion page offers an article titled “Dogma and Reason can Coexist” (Kingston Whig-Standard Oct 2, 2004) What does draw to KUF persons who have searched us on the internet and heard of us through their friends? Many reference that the principles and sources resonate. Many searching find that the Principles lead them to the openness in the centre – rather than dogma.

Loehr’s criticism of the Principles include his reflection on their origins. His first congregation was one selected for focus groups. The values garnered from many across the continent were polished and prodded into the principles. So, they reflect the values of that time. As Canadians the CUC recently tweaked the phrasing and spelling, and have embarked upon a several year exploration of the Principles. I am sure we will make some important discoveries. I think we will discover what an earlier generation Unitarian called the difference between the permanent and the transient. I find in the principles much that I find permanent or enduring about what I want to elevate in human interaction. Not in a form of fixed truth, but in a starting point, the place from which I explore my reality in the world. I find many longing to know, like Thoreau, what is worth my time and effort, or in the phrase of Henry Nelson Wieman “humans need some way to designate their primary commitment and to practice that commitment”. The Six Sources suggest that there is a very open point for where we look – using our experience and reason and drawing from any source that is of value.

The principles suggest what previous generations have found as some of those primary commitments. They suggest ways to practice the commitment to values through searching for peace, ensuring that people are active participants in matters that affect them. Both Drennan and Loehr suggest that our “aliveness” is related to being “relational”. Wieman continues his theme of Creativity as how we can engage with the universe, and Creative Interchange as our active, co-creative proactive way of engaging in the world. Wieman described that creative interchange as the “growth that takes place when ideas bump heads, blossoming into new possibilities,” - very similar to Ray’s Canadian Unitarianism: An Idea of a Possibility.

Perhaps what we all need is some way to stay connected in dialogue and as well to connect the Idea to the Possibility. Thoreau talked about hitching his wagon to a star. He also said that, “if you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.”

The arguments that we are dying, fail in other ways. They imply a passive uninvolved congregation huddled around gilded copies of the Principles enshrined like the 10 commandments which by order of a southern US judge were displayed in a courthouse. Good grief, I wouldn’t show up on Sunday morning if we treated the Principles as a finished product (dogma) or if you looked to my sermons or talks as “the truth”. We use the Principles and Sources in our explorations for lives lived deliberately. I know the transformation that goes on in persons’ lives – through the relationships and care extended to one another. I know the transformation that goes on through the ideas that are exchanged in small groups and shared experience during trips to Cuba, serving at Martha’s Table, and any number of community organizations and efforts where KUFers see one another. We already recognize a post-modern affinity with UUism, as pointed out in Jean Pfleiderer’s talk on Canadian Unitarianism as a Post Modern Religion at KUF in February of 2003. She concluded, “Canadian Unitarianism is truly post-modern religion, if it recognizes, as so far it seems to be doing, that the huge, organized, self-confident UU religion to the south rests upon a grand narrative that does not take us into account, but that our task as Canadian Unitarians is not to create another, counter, grand narrative. Instead, like the political confederation that defines our geographic boundaries, we can be a loose federation of small groups, each with our own small story about truth and meaning, full of respect for and enjoyment of all the

other stories.... What we share is the free and responsible search. As we didn't stop for the catholic truth, nor yet for the protestant truth, nor yet for the humanist truth, so, doubtless, we won't stop for any post-modern truth, either. Not even for the truth that there is no truth. The point is not to find truth, but to watch for it."

The stories here at KUF are as interesting as we are. And that again brings us back to the question of whether the Principles stand the test of relevant and practical for lives of KUF members and friends. Perhaps the strongest critique of Loehr is an elitist cleric assumption that "laity" are not capable of identifying what is a strong articulation of their longing. I observe that KUFers are very intent on finding their own words, refining their own truths, fine tuning their compass settings. Whether through our work, in our volunteer hours in organizations that implement what we value, or very distinct lifestyle choices I find that life continually weaves its way through the principles for many of us. When KUF children say the phrase "that's not fair", over the years there is a growing sophistication in reasoning that emerges from conversations, activities, and discussions. And paired with reasoning is the ability to implement, act on behalf of, to declare, "I care about this, and this is how I launch my caring". Our RE classes this year are using a covenant of behaviour, applying our principles in the most practical way – listen when another is speaking, no put downs, have fun!

As members of KUF we agree to promote the principles. What that suggests to me is that we take these words which were a very human creation in a particular time and make them come alive by asking like Thoreau did, how do I know how much is enough, what's important to me, what are my primary commitments. Rework them until the language resonates so clearly for you that you stand up at the end of the service each Sunday morning and walk out with some bounce in your step, clarity about what star your wagon is hitched to, and the support and inspiration of the very diverse group that gathers here each Sunday. We go out, live our values and act on our commitments. Different Beliefs, Shared Values, and pretty alive.

Thoreau went to the woods to reflect, but he didn't stay with reflection, and neither do we.

*"I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one. It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves... I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavours to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and interpreted in his favour in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings. In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty, nor weakness. If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them." (P. 303 Conclusion chapter of Walden Pond)*