

# The Power of Our Principles

27 May, 2018 :: Rev. Erika Hewitt

## Reflections, Part 1

The famous anthropologist Margaret Mead was once asked what she considered to be the earliest sign of civilization. Was it a clay cooking pot or a stone spearhead? Was it a fish hook, or something more sophisticated, like a primitive musical instrument?

Margaret Mead answered: "The first sign of civilization, for me, was the discovery of a healed femur bone" – a human thigh bone that had been broken, but was healed.

Dr. Mead explained that for most of human history, the principle of "the survival of the fittest" guided human behavior. In that arena, a broken leg bone would be a death sentence, because that person was unable to hunt; unable to walk.

For a bone to be healed, she maintained, another human being had to care for that person. Somebody else had to hunt; to gather; somebody else had to protect. Someone (or someones) had to care for the person while the broken bone healed. In other words, for Margaret Mead, compassion was the first sign of human civilization.

Anthropologists study human behavior in a fairly clinical way; "compassion" is the furthest they're comfortable going in ascribing motivation to human behavior. Happily, I'm no longer an anthropologist (more precisely, I'm no longer a doctoral student in anthropology), and so I'm both eager *and* authorized to reflect on our collective human decisions about whether, and how, and why we choose compassion and collective care-taking over "survival of the fittest."

A lot of people (including anthropologists) dislike religion, for a host of reasons: religious dogma, we know, is used as a weapon to divide and suppress people; it can be a tool of "power over" the most powerless.

The reason I'm a minister today, instead of a Ph.D. in anthropology, is that I believe that religion can also be live-giving. It can provide clarity in the muddiest of circumstances. It can instruct us how, and why, to set aside self-preservation in order to protect and nurture the well-being of others.

As Unitarian Universalists, we understand our religious values to instruct and inform our choices here, within these walls... but more importantly, they also instruct our behavior beyond these walls: "out there," in the real world.

You might say that we who are UU prize integrity above all else – "integrity" meaning wholeness, or the cohesion of aligning our beliefs with our actions. Because of that one of our most central and most beloved documents are the Seven Principles. These Principles form an ethical framework: a system by which we navigate the complexity of our values in the world.

*We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:*

- *The inherent worth and dignity of every person*
- *Justice, equity and compassion in human relations*
- *Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations*
- *A free and responsible search for truth and meaning*
- *The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large*
- *The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all*
- *Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.*

Each of these Principles is both an antidote to, and a compass through, every gesture of injustice and deception that unfolds in the world; every act of oppression or deception that we witness at the most public of levels.

As we take part in a responsive affirmation of our seven Principles, our readers will name a recent story in the news. We'll respond with an affirmation of each Principle.<sup>1</sup>

### **one**

From USA Today, May 16th: President Trump used extraordinarily harsh rhetoric to renew his call for stronger immigration laws, calling undocumented immigrants "animals" and venting frustration at Mexican officials who he said "do nothing" to help the United States.

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<sup>1</sup> Affirmation by Rev. Scott Alexander.

“We have people coming into the country or trying to come in, we’re stopping a lot of them, but we’re taking people out of the country. You wouldn’t believe how bad these people are,” Trump said. “These aren’t people. These are animals.”

*In a world with so much hatred and violence,  
We need a religion that proclaims the inherent worth and dignity of every person.*

### **two**

This month, lawmakers in Oklahoma and Kansas approved legislation that protects adoption and foster care agencies who use their religious beliefs to refuse placement of children with lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender parents. LGBT parents are six times more likely than straight couples to foster children, and four times more likely to adopt. Texas, Alabama, South Dakota, Virginia, and Michigan already have such laws in place, which embolden providers to discriminate against loving, qualified parents.

*In a world with so much brutality and fear,  
We need a religion that seeks justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.*

### **three**

The newly-released movie “Come Sunday” tells the story of evangelical preacher Carlton Pearson, who unleashed a firestorm when he questioned a core religious belief.

When Pearson began to renounce the doctrine of hell, and preach “universal reconciliation” – that all souls will be forgiven by God – he was labeled a heretic, losing his church and many of his most important relationships. (Bishop Carlton Pearson was welcomed, and is now on staff, at All Souls UU Church in Tulsa.)

*In a world with so many persons abused and neglected,  
We need a religion that calls us to accept one another and encourage one another to spiritual growth.*

### **four**

Under a new NFL policy unveiled this week, football teams will be fined if players on the field fail to stand during “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Whereas white NFL players have “taken a knee” in the past without comment, the football players being targeted by this policy are Black men exercising their freedom, and refusing to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people, and people of color.

*In a world with so much dogmatism and falsehood,*

*We need a religion that challenges us to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.*

### **five**

Businesses can now prohibit their workers from banding together in disputes about pay and workplace conditions, allowing employers to escape liability for harassment and discrimination.

The workers who will be hit hardest by Monday's Supreme Court ruling are low-wage earners; immigrants; people of color; teachers, whose strikes rely on collective bargaining. And this ruling will impact women immediately because they comprise eighty percent of low-wage workers and are most vulnerable to wage theft.

*In a world with so much tyranny and oppression,  
We need a religion that affirms the right and conscience and the use of the democratic process.*

### **six**

Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, continues to separate immigrants and asylum seekers from their young children. This week the *Washington Post* reported that "the Trump administration is making preparations to hold detained migrant children on military bases." These internment camps would be one more weapon in the ongoing war on immigrants and their children, which amounts to ethnic cleansing.

*In a world with so much inequity and strife,  
We need a religion that strives toward the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.*

### **seven**

While climate change is one factor in the current refugee crisis in the Middle East, a report from the Environmental Justice Foundation warns that tens of millions of people will be forced from their homes by climate change in the next decade, creating the biggest refugee crisis the world has ever seen. "We cannot hope to deal with the wave of suffering and disruption as single nations; it will not work," EJF's Executive Director says. "We will all be better served, better prepared and better protected if we act together."

*In a world with so much environmental degradation,*

*We need a religion that advocates respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.*

*In a world with so much uncertainty and despair,  
We need a religion that teaches our hearts to hope, and our hands to care.*

Antidote and balm to our cultural poisons.  
Compass in the moral whirlwind.  
Clarity about what we're called to be, and do, amid brokenness.

Our UU Principles profess the moral imperative at the heart of our religious tradition. They challenge us to be companions and allies of those who need a voice, a helping hand, or hope....

...and embodying hope is one of our chief purposes, as a religious community, because hope is an essential ingredient in our growth and wellbeing. In this congregation, we remind one another that nobody here is alone. We know that our witness and companionship may not resolve your sorrow or dispel your fear, but we trust that strong is what we make each other.

## **Reflections, Part 2**

By now, you understand and trust that I cherish our UU Principles as an ethical framework. You might also understand why some people experience a "conversion moment," or are even brought to tears, the first time they encounter our Principles. They have the power to do that – and more.

But notice: while our Principles place messy demands on us – to put our values into action – their cerebral words ring with crisp certainty. They guide our action prophetically. I believe that we need more than that, as human beings trying to navigate the depth of mystery and sorrow in the world.

Our Principles came into being in the early 1980s, when Unitarianism and Universalism were still hammering out the terms of their 1961 merger, sometimes acrimoniously, and our Association was desperate for a set of shared core beliefs.

So the Principles were the solution to an ecclesiastical problem; an identity crisis. As such, they weren't intended to address other, deeper human wonderings and impulses. The Principles don't instruct us how to poke at Mystery; how to formulate and entertain questions so vast and so universal that any answer we might arrive at

would immediately be suspect. They're a beacon for ethical action in the world, but they don't exactly light the path for navigating pain.

That's what's missing for me, in our Principles: language that backs off certainty, to bow humbly before That Which We Will Never Understand... a comforting response to the suffering that all of us will endure at one time or another.

Ministers are thrust into the arena of death on a regular basis. Eventually, you get used to rubbing elbows with death, and with the pain it leaves behind. But still: it haunts you.

I'm haunted by one such death, a decade ago: one of my parishioners died in lonely, harrowing circumstances. He was an addict. He'd been struggling with sobriety for years – and because of the powerful dynamics of addiction, so had his wife and children. He finally lost. It hurt everyone who loved him.

What I remember about A.'s memorial service was that it was standing room only, and that in our deep grief and rage at the power of addiction, most of us kept invoking an archaic word: "demons."

All of us – including me, in my eulogy – spoke of *demons*. It felt right to use this half-mythical, half-metaphorical term that pointed to a larger power, looming large over all of us (including many of Andy's friends, who themselves were balanced on the knife's edge of sobriety).

This is, to me, extraordinarily revealing: information and intellectual understanding can't always save us, or comfort us.

One of the purposes of religious community is to create safe space for one another. We care for our wounded – in body, in spirit – allowing them to heal while we protect and care for them. We choose, in ways both intimate and public, to suspend our own self-interest so that we might make companion a lived expression of our highest values.

The 7 Principles are one way to do that. They're not perfect – but neither are we. May we wrestle with them; may we wrestle them into practice... and may we embody the compassion and care for one another, as holy companions on the journey.