

Musings On Our Third Principle  
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Today's sermon focuses on the third principle of Unitarian Universalism, which reads, *We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.* It seems fitting that we are examining this particular principle on a day when we are recognizing new members, and welcoming them into our congregation.

To me, acceptance means welcoming one another as we are, without having to put on our *Sunday Best*, whether in clothing or demeanor. The dictionary offers *approval* as a synonym for acceptance. Approval is a stronger word than acceptance, suggesting that we actively accept, or celebrate, the differences among us. Our differences, like different colored threads in a tapestry, add variety and beauty to the fabric of our lives in community. On the other hand, the dictionary doesn't even mention *tolerance* in conjunction with acceptance. Tolerance is, to me, a lower level acceptance, a sort of *putting up with* rather than truly *celebrating*. And who among us wants to be merely tolerated. Don't we all want to feel accepted and approved of for who we are?

In January, I spoke about our first principle, *the inherent worth and dignity of every person.* I found upon reflection that some things I said then about hospitality bear repeating in the context of our third principle.

Hospitality is not only a way of reaching out and helping others, but it is also of great spiritual benefit to the one practicing hospitality. Sometimes we make the effort to extend hospitality, or active acceptance, to others, believing that in that way we can help them. But more often than not, it has been shown that the one who is extending the help is positively affected at least as much as the one who is receiving the help. You may have had

that experience yourself. There is even an expression “It is better to give than to receive”. (Actually receiving can be more difficult than giving, as it requires humility, and swallowing one’s pride, but that’s another topic for another day.)

Acceptance predominates in many families, and in most Unitarian Universalist congregations. It means *not having to think alike to love alike*, as the great Unitarian Francis David said centuries ago in Transylvania. People in this congregation have a wide variety of spiritual beliefs and theologies. Some share them freely with others, and some keep their beliefs closer to their chests (like cards in a game of poker). But when we observe each other closely, and really listen to each other, we will discover each others’ beliefs expressed in words and deeds. As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote many years ago:

*A person will worship something- have no doubt about that.*

*We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts- but it will out.*

*That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives and character.*

*Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.*

The second part of the third principle says we are committed to providing *encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations*. That, to me means that we will help each other see our potential as individuals, and as a church body, and will encourage spiritual deepening which will help us move toward that potential.

But from the perspective of hospitality in a spiritual sense, perhaps one needs to welcome and accept people as they are, before they can even dream of changing. And whether or not they change, they are still worthy of being welcomed, even as we would want to be welcomed by fellow human beings. And, reaching out with hospitality can be experienced as reward in itself, whether or not it leads to change. When we can let go of

the need to change others, we can experience true hospitality.

As I was reflecting upon the principle- *We covenant to affirm and promote: Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations* it occurred to me to wonder: *Are acceptance and encouragement to growth compatible?* There seems to me to be a tension in this principle. We covenant to accept people as they are (and are pretty good at doing so, especially if they have some apparent commonality with the one who is practicing the acceptance). And yet we also covenant to encourage each other to spiritual growth. Is there a conflict here? Are we all right, and worthy of approval and acceptance as we are, or do we need to grow spiritually? Is it a case of either / or, or of both / and? Perhaps the conflict or tension in the principle is helpful. The image of a toddler learning to walk comes to mind. A certain level of acceptance and safety, as in having a secure home-base, allows the toddler to venture forth to explore, knowing the route of return.

And in physical therapy, there is a clear goal, or vision, of the desired result, and continuous challenges to get there. There are professionals, knowledgeable and experienced guides, to make sure that one stays on track and continues to make progress without experiencing debilitating pain or setbacks. In my experience, both the toddler learning to walk and one engaged in physical therapy make incremental progress, building on what has already been achieved. There may be falls or setbacks, but with encouragement and guidance, major injury is avoided and progress is made over time.

As many of you know, the Principles and Purposes were last established in 1985. It was agreed that they would be looked at periodically by the member congregations under the leadership of the Commission on Appraisal (a group of volunteers elected by the congregations at a General Assembly, GA) and revised if necessary. There is a belief in Unitarian Universalist congregations that revelation is not sealed, but that truth and meaning are continuing to evolve, along with our ability to

understand them... thus the embrace of an ongoing free and responsible search for truth and meaning. The revised principles, to be voted on at GA, have the 3rd principle reading:

*Acceptance of one another and encouragement of spiritual growth.*

It is a minor change, but it says *of* rather than *to*, suggesting that there is an ongoing goal of spiritual growth, rather than that such growth has an end point.

The proposed revision also omits the phrase, *in our congregations*. It's not that it is unimportant to encourage spiritual growth in our congregations; it is *essential*. But omitting the phrase broadens the encouragement of spiritual growth to our daily lives in the world. I see this as a helpful revision, as I hope and trust that our faith and our values do inform our lives in the world.

The proposed revision also changes the introduction of the principles. It is currently:

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

The proposed revision of the introduction to the principles reads:

*Grateful for the gift of life, we commit ourselves as member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association to embody together the transforming power of love as we covenant to honor and uphold:*

So, the proposed revision maintains a description of the relationship of the member congregations to the Unitarian Universalist Association, which I think is important. (We are independent congregations in association with each other.) It begins with a statement of gratitude, which I think is a wonderful place to begin. It also maintains the language of covenant, which is a religious term suggesting that we have a powerful relationship in which we agree to honor and uphold certain principles. I'm not sure whether it was important that we covenant to *honor and uphold* rather than to *affirm and promote*, but I imagine we will eventually learn why those words were chosen in the proposed revision. I do like that we are

saying that we, as member congregations, commit ourselves to *embody together the transforming power of love*. That, in itself is a strong commitment, and if taken seriously, has the power to transform us and our congregations.

Growth implies change, and change can be painful. I think all of us have experienced “growing pains” in ourselves or our children. Churches, and other groups of people, can also experience growing pains. But as a friend has said “change is inevitable; suffering is optional”. When we approach change with awareness and an expectation of some discomfort, we can experience the excitement of growth, new knowledge, and greater acceptance.

The tension which is found in the third principle, between acceptance of one another and encouragement of spiritual growth, can be very healthy as we seek to navigate it. When we can accept people as they are, we truly welcome them, and allow them room to grow and change in ways none of us might have imagined. In this way, people become stronger and happier, and their true gifts and talents shine forth. When the church is comprised of such individuals, as long as they *accept* and respect each others’ gifts and talents, the church also becomes stronger, happier, and richer in diverse talents. Then, whether or not the church grows numerically, it will grow spiritually. And who wouldn’t want to be affiliated with such a group of people?

May it be so.