

Principles, Values, and the Living Tradition: Unitarian Universalist Theology

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Story “What Can You Do With an Idea?” Written by Kobi Yamada Illustrated by Mae Besom

First Reading from “Watchmaker, Webweaver, Accident, Plan” by Adam Robersmith

Second Reading by Eugene Pickett, quoted in Warren Ross, “The Premise and the Promise,” page 91.

Sermon

What do you say when someone asks you about Unitarian Universalism? Many of us lead with the fact that we have no dogma or creed – no set statement of belief that defines us through the ages, or that members are expected to sign on to. Freedom of belief, and a practice of tolerating – even respecting – a range of beliefs is, and always will be, part of who we are.

But there has to be more to our identity than what we are not. We need, said Pickett, some religious depth ourselves. Ideas that change the world.

In 1961, when the Unitarians and Universalists came together into one religion, they struggled to articulate what they valued and believed. Ultimately, they crafted Six Principles – 6 things we were trying to achieve in the world, from strengthening liberal religion to searching for truth, to building a world of peace and justice. But those Principles didn’t get much attention - they were filed away in Article II of the denominational bylaws, and out of most people’s awareness.

Creating a document that articulates what we’re here for is pretty standard for a religion. Putting it in the bylaws is a maybe a little odd, but in character for us. But those bylaws also contain something that’s pretty unusual - Article XV, which says that revisions to Article II are to be considered at least every 15 years.

This reflects a critical piece of our theology. “Revelation is not sealed” is one way to put it. Article XV reflects a belief that we learn and grow, and over time our answers to theological questions change, and this is good. So we commit to regular reflection and re-examination of who we are, what we value and aspire to, and what this looks like in our lives. Not having a creed isn’t just about personal freedom – it is also a spiritual practice. As individuals, as a congregation, as a denomination.

The 15-year time frame for that denominational re-examination has, so far anyway, been a bit aspirational. But we’ve done a significant overhaul twice.

The first time was soon after Pickett spoke the words in our reading. It was those women with the daunting mission of removing sexism from Unitarian Universalism who noticed that those early Principles ... cried out for some attention. Their revision was not adopted (a big issue was their removal of references to God and Christianity).¹ But their work inspired the formation of – of course - a committee to try again.

The committee dealt with God and Christianity by dividing their statement into two parts – 7 Principles without theistic language paired with some “sources of our living tradition” with such language. The result was pretty different from the original Article II, but – after much discussion and debate - the 1985 General Assembly approved it.

And Unitarian Universalists enthusiastically embraced these new principles. It seems there was a hunger for some kind of word to spread. These Principles were a covenant among the congregations to “affirm and promote” certain goals for the world and human relationships. So not a statement of belief or values,

¹ Edward A. Frost, *With Purpose and Principle*, 12-13.

but a reflection of our collective beliefs and values. And those principles quickly became the word that we spread.

You can find these Principles in the grey hymnal, right before the first hymn. They've been on bookmarks, wallet cards, posters, websites, We taught them to our children year after year with catchy tunes and pneumonics and coloring pages. When asked about this faith – along with the fact that we're not credal - many of us told people about these Principles. Some of us were initially attracted to Unitarian Universalism because of them. We might or might not ever have been able to recite them from memory, but for a lot of Unitarian Universalists, they became central to who we are, and how we talk about who we are.

And (with a little tweak in the 90's) those Principles remained in place for nearly 40 years. This iteration of Article II started to feel more set in stone than was ever intended.

But, we continued to grow and change. And, in 2020, a commission was finally charged with proposing a new Article II. The goal was not to just revise the principles – but to update how we talk about who we are in whatever format made sense. In fact, the charge explicitly stated that there is “nothing sacred” about the wording or layout of Article II. This is important – if there were words we could not change - we might have ourselves a creed. But we don't.

In 2021, after a lot of input from Unitarian Universalists, the commission shared a draft. In 2022, they processed even more feedback, and revised the draft. In 2023, at our General Assembly, Unitarian Universalists voted overwhelmingly to bring the proposed Article II to a vote at the next general assembly. And this year, in June, after a little more amendment, the new language was approved.

In this Article II, there are no principles, and no sources. Instead it offers love as “the enduring force that holds us together” at the center of six values (which emerged from surveys of thousands of Unitarian Universalists). Those values are shown in the image on your order of service, and further defined within Article II. And they're going to be our (somewhat loosely held) monthly worship themes this year – starting with justice in October.

After the values, in the new Article II, there's a section entitled “inspiration” (with echoes of the previous sources); followed by “inclusion” – a commitment to welcome, and breaking down barriers created by systems of power, privilege and oppression; and finally a “freedom of belief” statement that reminds us yet again that none of this is a creed.

This new Article II looks quite different. But, since it is not a creed, we can continue to refer to and use the Principles where that makes sense. They're not wrong – just . . . dated.

So what is the theology that underlies all of this? In this deeply troubled world, what is the word that we have to spread?

As I give you my take on this, I want to stress that this theology may or may not be your theology. There's nothing in Unitarian Universalism that requires you to believe anything. If there's a piece you just don't believe, today or ever, this is still your church. But whatever our personal beliefs, through this theology, Unitarian Universalism calls us to act in a way that aligns.

Let's go back to our commitment to ongoing revision of Article II, and add in the 4th principle – the free and responsible search for truth and meaning - and the value of pluralism, which includes that same language. Beneath all of that is the belief that we get to define our beliefs. There are other ways to think about the source of religious truth and meaning – it might reside in a text, a tradition, or particular individuals who impart their revelations to others. We do learn from one another and from writings and practices that carry ancient wisdom, but this theology says that we decide.

This belief is empowering – each of us has the capacity to make claims of religious truth! But it's also challenging – we're expected to take what we believe seriously enough to question and listen, learn and reason, and experience life fully and reflect on what it means. We're expected to change. A creed might be easier.

And, there's more to this theology.

Take the question of human nature. Both our first principle and the value of equity say that every person has inherent worth and dignity. That's not the starting point in every faith tradition. Some – like our Calvinist religious ancestors - begin with inherent human depravity, sinfulness, unworthiness.

The underlying belief here is not that every person is perfect or that everything we do is good. But there is a belief that everyone is, in some way, inherently worthy, regardless of what we have done or what has happened to us.

That you don't have to earn your worth – everyone has it, so neither you nor anyone else has to sacrifice in order for you to be worthy. And you cannot lose your worth.

This is a powerful theological statement. It's also a belief that can be hard to hold. There may be people in whom you struggle to see inherent worth. As I said, you don't need to be on board with this right now. But this is the theology, and Unitarian Universalism asks us to wrestle with it, and to strive to act as if it is so.

If that were all we had to say about human nature, this faith might be a little narcissistic – and it would struggle to grapple with the unspeakably awful things people do sometimes. But there's more. The seventh principle and the value of interdependence reflect a belief about how the universe (with us in it) works. The core belief here is that all of existence forms an interdependent web. That, too, is a huge theological statement that differs from other options that are structured around hierarchy and domination. With interdependence, we're part of a bigger whole, not the pinnacle, not the center – but connected; and dependent.

This theology might be easier to fully accept – there's increasing evidence from science, and things like climate change and pandemic, that this is, in fact, how the world works.

And ... if we follow this line of thinking further, it takes us to some interesting theological places. If we believe that we're all interdependent, then acting as though we are separate from the rest of creation could be what we think of as sin. And our salvation, with this theology, could be whatever brings our heart and our actions back into alignment with that fundamental interdependence.

And this theology asks of us a certain humility. There's no “dominion over” anything or anyone. We're all beautiful and beloved – as special as anyone else ... and no more special than anyone else.

This is a theology that, if we take it seriously, constantly calls us into particular ways of being with each other ... and to undo oppression, resist exploitation, and minimize harm to others and our planet. To repair the harm caused by the sins of separation and domination. It's a demanding theology. //

We also have something to say about eschatology – which is “theology-speak” for the ultimate goal, our vision of the world to come, what we hope for and aspire to. The ultimate goal for us is not heaven after we die – it's here, in this life – a world community of peace, liberty and justice as our 6th Principle puts it – or in the language of the Values, a diverse, multicultural, inclusive Beloved Community.

And we have an ecclesiology – a sense of how and why we gather - that's reflected in our 3rd and 5th principles and the values of transformation and justice. The belief here is that our congregations exist to be places of acceptance and transformation, and to support the practice of democracy and further justice. Once again, there are other options – we could gather to promote a commitment to doctrine or individual salvation. But our theology points us in a different direction – toward relationship and connection – salvation, if you will, all together.

So those seven Principles, and the new Values, offer evolving expressions of long-standing beliefs about personal agency, inherent worth, interdependence, justice, and a goal of healing together in this life. But there are some pieces of our theology that have only recently been reflected in our collective language.

The 8th Principle is not in the hymnal because it was never adopted by the denomination as a whole, but over the last 7 years it was adopted by many congregations, including ours. It calls for accountable actions to dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions. We can see the rest of the theology reflected here, with the clarity of some specificity and action words.

This use of ... verbs ... and the word “accountable” – was new. And the revised Article II picked up both the action words and the accountability.

And it introduced a new word: Love! That word is new to Article II, but not to Unitarian Universalism. The idea of centering Love comes from our Universalist heritage, and in recent years, an increasing number of Unitarian Universalists have been thinking about and articulating a faith rooted in Love – and manifested in our values. And it's been resonating. You'll hear it in my sermons this year.

Which brings us back to where we started – a faith tradition that insists on the spiritual practice of reflecting on our beliefs and commitments, and revising who we say we are.

As you explore the new language, I invite you to not just critique the chosen words (which we all can do) but to spend some time with the powerful theology that's reflected there and that this world so desperately needs, so that we might continue to find more clarity about the word that's ours to spread.

And may that clarity call us ever more to action.

For what you do with an idea ... is change the world.

May it be so.

Amen.