

“Our Living Tradition”

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© Rev. Lisa Bovee-Kemper

Reading: ARTICLE II Principles and Purposes 9 Section C-2.1 (UUA Bylaws)

Principles.

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.

The living tradition which we share draws from many sources:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- Words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;
- Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.

Sermon

I'm not going to make you raise your hands, but how many of you looked at the order of service for today and said, "A reading from BYLAWS?! What craziness is THIS going to be?!" So many jokes, right? – I mean, if UUs could create a committee on committees, then it wouldn't be a stretch to say that bylaws could be our scripture! Thank you for trusting me and coming to church anyway!

So, why bylaws? Bylaws are the rules and procedures that an organization follows to ensure legality and productivity. They are both a legal document and roadmap, sometimes described as an operating manual for an organization. The reading Richard shared was from Article II of the bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association, titled "Principles and Purposes." Its subsections include the Principles and Sources, as well as sections on Purposes, Inclusion, and Freedom of Belief. Article II Section C 2.1 probably sounded familiar when Richard read it.

The first part of the reading was the seven principles which outline the covenant between our congregations. These are statements of our Unitarian Universalist values, and they are probably somewhat familiar to you. We covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person, justice, equity, and compassion in human relations, and so on. I wouldn't be surprised, though, if the words got less familiar around line 22:

<slide> The living tradition which we share draws from many sources.

The text continues with a list of six sources which will be the topics for a seven-sermon series that begins today. The series will not be consecutive, and each sermon will stand on its own, but over the next 4 months, I will explore each one of these six sources of our faith, one source per sermon. This morning is an orientation of sorts, or an overview.

The sources will be presented in the order they appear in the bylaws. I've paraphrased them here.

<slide> Direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder, **<slide>** Words and deeds of prophetic people, **<slide>** Wisdom from the world's religions, **<slide>** Jewish & Christian teachings, **<slide>** The guidance of reason and the results of science, **<slide>** Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions

There is no source more or less important than any other to our faith as a whole, though some people tend to lean toward one or another in their personal interpretation of theology and spiritual practice.

Why are there so many sources? We are a non-creedal faith tradition, a religion that has no single scripture to interpret, and which emphasizes the free and responsible search for meaning. Time and time again, we hear our detractors, and sometimes even actual Unitarian Universalists, say that our non-creedal nature means that we can believe whatever we want to believe. But it's not true, and as a minister in this faith tradition, it makes me cringe to hear those words. Our personal beliefs can inhabit a

wide range of ideas and interpretations, but our search for understanding must be both free and responsible.

<slide> What about the seven principles, though? You may be familiar also with the kid's version, which some find more poetic and easier to remember.

<slide> How many of you think of *those* as belief statements? Many of us were actually taught the principles as beliefs in religious education – and there is an unfortunate (in my opinion) poster found in most UU spaces that prefaces the principles with the words, “we believe.” Nonetheless, the seven principles are not actually what we *believe*. They are *values*.

Technically a covenant between the member congregations within the UUA, the principles tell us how we agree to interact with one another. They are foundational to Unitarian Universalism for sure, but they are not theological statements and they are not beliefs. *They are values*. And in a tradition that is specifically organized to *remove* creeds and tests of faith from religious experience, we cannot rely on theology to define who we are as a community and how we interact with one another.

Since we are not required to share theology or belief, it isn't possible to codify our structures and processes based on those things. There isn't one source from which we all draw our inspiration. But if we aspire to be something more than a loosely affiliated group of superficially like-minded individuals who can believe anything we want, we must have something that defines us. The six sources can be that something.

<slide> And so we return to line 22 of the bylaws, which contains two essential and foundational phrases. <slide> “***The living tradition which we share*** draws from many sources.” Fundamentally, Unitarian Universalism is not static. Though it has deep roots in historical and theological tradition, it is experienced and practiced in real time as we interact with the world around us. James Luther Adams introduces “the principle that ‘revelation’ is continuous.” We sometimes say, “revelation is not sealed.”

This foundational concept is an acknowledgement that as a religious people Unitarian Universalists are continually learning and experiencing life, and as a non-creedal faith our understanding of meaning and belief is eminently interpretable and always evolving. We do not throw away the learnings of the past, instead our faith is alive and we are engaged in an ongoing search. There is always more to learn and interpret. This is in direct opposition to the idea of a static and literal interpretation of scripture, Biblical or otherwise.

<slide> Now the second part, “the living tradition we share ***draws from many sources***.” In addition to opposing a static and literal interpretation of scripture, Unitarian Universalism also acknowledges and embraces a broad and deep definition of what “scripture” even is. Scripture, for us, is not simply a written work or works, it is more than only religious material, we draw inspiration from life experience, tradition, science and more.

What is a source? A number of images come to my mind. When writing a book or academic paper, a writer must show their sources. Footnotes in a written document give us the source for quotes included

word for word as well as concepts that inspired interpretation and exposition of new ideas. A spring is a source of water, and cruciferous vegetables are a source of vitamins A, C, and K.

The Rev. Paul Oakley says, “there is a great deal of confusion among Unitarian Universalists about what the sources are. Some believe that the list of sources tells us of our history, the identity of the strands of our theological DNA.” Others describe them more as choices describing where we find inspiration – perhaps more like a smorgasbord – as in one’s personal beliefs contain mostly one or two sources, perhaps with a sprinkle of a third.

Oakley continues, “Is it a statement of our borrowings or influences in a world of inevitable borrowings and influences? I believe it tells us that the boundaries of our religious identity are porous. It means that our experience of the world includes all that we encounter deeply enough that it becomes an essential part of us. It does so even though we did not, as a group, create it or inherit it.

It means that we adapt to emergent realities in our civilization, in our nation by transforming our minds as we encounter difference and grow from it. We develop as a religious identity, we develop within this religious identity, by doing, by practicing the lessons we have used to adapt to the constant evolution of the human spirituality.”

The sources are neither a multiple-choice quiz nor a buffet from which we choose the foods we like and leave the ones we don’t to congeal under the heat lamps. They are part of the tapestry that is Unitarian Universalism. <slide>The sources function as the warp – the threads that are tied onto the loom to create the foundational shape and structure of the tapestry. We provide the weft, the threads that move back and forth, in and out as the piece is woven, to create the picture we see. Texture, depth, image, color and more combine to create something that is greater than all the pieces combined.

If, as a congregation, we are engaging fully in the life of our community, we will be exposed to all the sources at different times and in different ways. We will hear sermons, we will read books, we will take classes, we will have conversations, all contributed by different people, experiences, and backgrounds. Then we will each interpret what we hear and experience.

This is not an easy job. Being Unitarian Universalist isn’t one size fits all, and nobody’s going to tell you what to believe. But it isn’t a choose your own adventure book, either. It is a living tradition which ebbs and flows as we each continue to engage in the process of understanding and developing our own beliefs. It is my goal in Sunday services to cover a broad swath of theological concepts and spiritual ideas over time. I don’t use the sources as a To Do list, focusing on the metrics of quantifiable representation – how many Buddhists did I quote, and how many Taoists, and so on. I think of them more like a galaxy – an endless spring of inspiration, sparking ideas innumerable as stars. A living tradition.

It’s not easy to be an authentically pluralistic community, but I believe it is worth the challenge. I often say that the greatest gift Unitarian Universalism has to offer is the way we honor paradox: We can each hold personal beliefs that are entirely mutually exclusive or in opposition to one another. We do this every day! In order to embody this tradition which accepts and encourages many paths, we must take the time to really live into this truth, and practice the skills we need to succeed.

True religious pluralism does more than simply tolerate that there are many paths to the truth. True religious pluralism celebrates our differences and is curious about our similarities, honoring the totality of possibility in each source of inspiration.

The Rev. Jason Shelton, who wrote the music for the Sources Cantata says, “There are differences between us that are real and substantive, and if we let them, they could tear us apart. If we don’t engage with what it means to be Christian in a UU setting, or humanist in a pluralist setting, then we are lacking the tools to be in community with one another. Instead of watering everything down to the theological least common denominator, we need to be in integrity with each of our Sources—not watering down Christianity so the humanist feels comfortable with it, or watering down humanism so the pagans feel comfortable with it. Sometimes there will be things that express your theology and make me feel uncomfortable, but I will grow spiritually by being in community with you, who sees things differently.” (Jason Shelton)

True pluralism understands that the goal of our religious community is not to meet each single expressed need or opinion, but to create a brave and flexible space in which we are all free to explore, learn, refine, and grow.

Hear now the words that conclude Article II Section C 2.1:

“Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision.”

May we each engage the journey with integrity and curiosity as we gather in community for mutual support and love.

May it be so.