

November 21, 2021
“Covenant & Principle”
By Rev. Ron Phares

As we prepare to cast our votes concerning a revision to our CUC principles, it seems appropriate to reflect on them some. So here’s the thing.

Our principles are a bit of a mess. They are. Why wouldn’t they be? They were originally drafted, and later revised, in committee and had to pass muster with hundreds of delegates, each presumably with an opportunity to weigh in. As such, they are, in my opinion, prone to a lowest common denominator kind of legalese. They are broadly acceptable, but not particularly poetic, nor entirely always consistent with the notion of a principle. One of them even identifies itself as a goal.

That they’re a mess should not be a surprise, I suppose, given that they are trying to articulate some very essential things in language that is acceptable to a diverse array of people who, every last one of them, thinks they know better.

Take the preamble. It names who we are and that we, “covenant to affirm and promote...” This is a statement of religious principles and the strongest verbs we could agree on was “affirm and promote?” Writing workshop facilitators: to arms!

Not only are these verbs less than rousing, they unfortunately codify a shadow side of our tradition’s predisposition, where our principles become something that we simply agree with and then use to scaffold the lives we already have rather than calling us into something more expansive, active, and effective. I’d prefer the central statement of my religious tradition to call me to something beyond agreeing and expressing.

Then we move on to the much beloved first principle where the word is “worth” strikes me as a weird term to apply to people in a culture as consumerist as ours. Further on, I’d argue that democracy is a tactic, and a flawed one, rather than a principle. The principle is fair and inclusive decision making I think. Meanwhile, the right of

conscience could conceivably undermine all the others if unmitigated. And finally, we often make a lie of our affirmation of our interdependence in principle while insisting on individualism in practice.

This is to say nothing about what our principles leave out: no acknowledgement of suffering, misconduct, or evil whatsoever, leaving us with a vacuous insistence on positivity that gives away our cultural position, limits our spiritual growth, and positions us in line with an indeterminate humanist infused prosperity gospel the operates like the misbegotten love child of evangelist Joel Osteen and Steven Pinker.

What’s included is awkward and what’s left out is crippling. They’re a mess, our principles. And I love them. Would I change them if granted that power? Absolutely. Do I claim them anyway? Absolutely.

They are, in this way, like a congregation. Messy but magical. Perfect and flawed. Frustrating and beloved. Thus have they always been. Lucky for us, ours is a living tradition, one that evolves as our last set of understandings propel us onto new vistas from which we can see things from different perspectives.

Today, we step into this tradition. And we will not be the first.

You can read the original principles that emerged from the union of the Unitarians and the Universalists in 1961 above me.

... the members of the Unitarian Universalist Association, dedicated to the principles of a free faith, unite in seeking:

- 1. To strengthen one another in a free and disciplined search for truth as the foundation of our religious fellowship;*
- 2. To cherish and spread the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, immemorially summarized in the Judeo-Christian heritage as love to God and love to man;*

3. *To affirm, defend and promote the supreme worth of every human personality, the dignity of man, and the use of the democratic method in human relationships;*
4. *To implement our vision of one world by striving for a world community founded on ideals of brotherhood, justice and peace;*
5. *To serve the needs of member churches and fellowships, to organize new churches and fellowships, and to extend and strengthen liberal religion;*
6. *To encourage cooperation with men of good will in every land.*

In 1979 a UU Continental Conference on Women and Religion determined that those principles, with all their references to man, mankind, and brotherhood, “not only failed to affirm them as women, but failed to indicate a respect for the wholeness of life and for the earth.”

The notion gained momentum and in 1981 turned into a UUA appointed committee whose mandate was to make sure everyone felt they belonged; women, atheists, and Christians alike. It was this committee that divided the litany into two parts; our principles and our sources.

Phrases like “mankind” were removed, and a “disciplined search” was replaced with a “responsible search.” The verbs in the preamble shifted from “seeking” to “affirming and promoting.” And the 7th principle, the one of the interdependent web, which had no precedent in the original version, was added. Each of these changes are hugely significant ethically, ontologically, and spiritually.

These changes were adopted in 1981 and that is how we got our current principles. But that’s not the end of their story.

In 2009, seven years after the CUC diverged from the UUA, an amendment to the Principles came before the UUA General Assembly¹. The proposal sought to change the verbs of the preamble from

“affirm and promote” to “honor and uphold.” I like that.

With the exception of changing “respect” to “reverence” for the interdependent web of existence, the principles remained the same.

However, directly after the principles, a paragraph was added after the principles that included the following language. “Capable of both good and evil, at times we are in need of forgiveness and reconciliation. When we fall short of living up to this covenant, we will begin again in love, repair the relationship, and recommit to the promises we have made.” I really like that.

The list of sources was condensed and replaced by a couple paragraphs. Significantly, the proposal also included an additional section on inclusion that read, in part, “Systems of power, privilege, and oppression have traditionally created barriers for persons and groups with particular identities, ages, abilities, and histories. We pledge to do all we can to replace such barriers with ever-widening circles of solidarity and mutual respect.”

This set of revisions failed to pass, with the cons outnumbering the pros by a mere 13 votes.²

The proposed form of the sources were deemed unpoetic and suffered from not including earth centered traditions. What was sacrificed, however... what was missed was significant.

We lost an acknowledgment of our capacity for good and evil, our fallibility, and the need for forgiveness. We also lost an explicit declaration of our stance against systems of oppression.

In 2017 the UUA revisited the explicit call to fight systems of oppression when Black Lives of UU proposed an 8th principle which would affirm and promote, “journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably

¹ <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/commission-offers-second-draft-new-uua-principles>

² <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/ga-rejects-new-principles-purposes>

dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.”

You can hear the resonance and difference between the UUA’s proposed 8th Principle and the CUC’s, which was included and proposed in the recommendations put forth by the Dismantling Racism Study Group commissioned by the CUC.

And that brings us to today, where we are considering our congregational position on adding a perhaps flawed, imperfect 8th principle to the seven flawed and imperfect principles we already have.

But for all their imperfections, I know what the spirit of them is. I know their spirit. While I love precision in language, I would never chuck out the first principle just because I think worth and dignity are inadequate articulations of it’s spirit. I can live with its imperfections. For the spirit of the principle, and the impact of that spirit, speak to my soul.

Now, since I’ve scolded the spineless verbs of affirm and promote, it is important to note a very strong verb in the preamble. That verb is covenant. We the congregations of the CUC covenant to affirm and promote...

A covenant is promise. Our principles are promises. Made between congregations and, perhaps by extrapolation, between each of us and possibly within each of us.

As poet Robert Service noted, “a promise made is a debt unpaid.” It implies accountability and always has. While the proposed 8th principle names it explicitly, accountability is actually implied throughout our principles because they are a promise.

They are our responsibility to one another. As such, they call us into accountability, yes, and also care. That is a cyclical dynamic that creates a covenantal community. And without either one of them, we have nothing but a track to tyranny. And so the wording of the 8th, in this case and in part, by

naming accountability, makes explicit the spirit of covenantal communities.

As to the spirit of the 8th, you must know by now that I like it. Anti-racism is unquestionably a principle of my life, however imperfectly executed. As importantly, this would be the first of our principles to call for our transformation rather than our mere affirmation. It points to how we might do better - dispelling the insidious whisper of the prosperity gospel in our tradition.

Positivity becomes destructive and oppressive when it is our only identified assumption. I can not operate in that manner without becoming sick. And neither can our planet. And this is so because it is a denial of our wholeness and an ignorance of our impact.

We need to know that while we are not born corrupt, we are born corruptible. Indeed, it may well be through our inherent imperfection that our dignity is manifest. To find worth we face our imperfection. To find ability we face our disability. To find wholeness we face it’s denial. To find the light we must face the shadow. To find beloved community we must wrestle with where we have prevented it. To do otherwise is ethically and spiritually irresponsible, cowardly, and callous.

We have inherent dignity because we have inherent imperfections. Facing them is the path that generates dignity. And this is not only to our benefit and the benefit of our fellow humans, it is the work our planet yearns for.

To change the trajectory of our dwindling viability on this planet, and the viability of countless other species on this planet, requires of us a paradigm shift. Paradigm shifts are not accomplished without doing shadow work.

You can not buy a paradigm shift. You can not charm it into being. You can not invent a new technology that will ultimately do anything other than what we have done and are doing until we do our shadow work. You can not free yourself from the trauma of your childhood or worst moment or from any trauma at all without facing it.

A living tradition. A living, breathing, changing tradition. A tradition that lets the life in. A tradition that breathes.

Racism and its cousin systems, attitudes, and inheritances of oppression is the single biggest shadow, the single biggest trauma that we have to work on because the brutalization of each other is both closest to hand and the most reflective mirror of our nature.

If we do not address it, not as somebody else's issue as though we are somehow exempt from this legacy, but as our own, as our shadow... if we can not do that work and prioritize it, all that is good will be lost.

Our present earth-poisoning paradigm will never be undone, for we will have failed to address the most empathetically present shadow we have. While they are all part of the same beast of domination, racism bears its human face. And it is pervasive and present.

Identifying it and working through it with compassion and grace expands our identities, cultivates more empathy, and just feels good. It feels good. It feels better. And it makes a difference on more than me.

Acknowledging our inherent imperfection and its inherited traumas is shadow work, the kind of work from which our dignity is finally born. Those who practice this, coupled with the comprehension that we are mutually dependent, flawed and beloved, that we hold each other in care and accountability, will find that one thing will always be true: you have a chance.

And you belong. For, "when we fall short of living up to this covenant, we will begin again in love, repair the relationship, and recommit to the promises we have made."

To be sure, our principles are a bit of a mess. So are you. So am I. So are we. A bit of a mess, yes, and beautiful, insightful, instructive, loving. Beautiful and flawed. Flawed and fabulous. Casting light into our inherited shadows. In other words; Alive.