

First Principles – the first of seven services on our UU Principles A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse on 12 October 2008 Chip Roush

OPENING WORDS “We affirm and promote...the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” That is the first of seven principles written in the bylaws of our Unitarian Universalist Association. Our first principle is a direct challenge to the doctrine of original sin. Many traditional Christian theologians refer to humans as “fallen,” as fundamentally sinful, even as depraved. We freely admit that we are all imperfect, but we insist that we are still capable of doing good in the world. As Laila Ibrahim wrote, “it is a *blessing* that each of us was born.”

ASSOCIATION SUNDAY COLLECTION The song we just sang, “Spirit of Life,” was written by Carolyn McDade. She wrote it as a prayer, not as a hymn. When she, herself, was at a low point, and she needed encouragement she sat down and sang her request: “Spirit of Life, come unto me; sing in my heart, all the stirrings of compassion.”

That heartfelt yearning is apparent in the song, and it has touched many other people, as well. Many UU churches sing it every Sunday—a fact which troubles Ms. McDade, because she fears it will lose its potency, and lose the social justice emphasis she intended.

She has the right to believe that, *and* I respectfully disagree with her... I think the social justice message does sink into those who sing it. I think it does affect us; it does urge us to do our part, to give life the shape of justice.

The same UU congregations who sing her song are working to bring equal rights to bisexuals, gays, lesbians, and transgendered people; they are working to protect and sustain our environment; they are trying to make single-payer, nonprofit healthcare available to everyone; they are educating themselves and others about racism and other forms of oppression; they feed the hungry, visit the sick and provide some shelter for the homeless. Our 1100+ congregations do a great deal of justice work.

To help coordinate and support our efforts, our congregations have joined together, to create the Unitarian Universalist Association of congregations. The UUA, as we sometimes refer to it, acts as a clearinghouse for information and best practices, and it prints religious education curricula and the hymnals we use; and it represents us to the government and the press. (For example, our UUA president, Bill Sinkford, was one of a few leaders of religious & peace groups to meet with Iranian leaders recently, to encourage equality for women and for bisexual, gay, lesbian and transgendered human beings.)

Our UUA helps congregations to find well-trained ministers, and makes scholarships available as part of that training. And it creates training programs for lay leaders, such as the UU University programs before General Assembly, where many people have learned about church finances; and how to attract, engage and keep new members; how to manage conflict; and how to give our kids the best religious education possible.

This year, our UUA is focusing on *theological* education, for both seminarians and lay leaders. Many people have requested deeper forms of adult education. These folks do not want to attend theological school, but they do want to explore the big questions of life in a more rigorous and meaningful way.

Today is “Association Sunday.” Many UU congregations across these United States are having this same discussion, and will take a collection to support the UUA’s work on our behalf. Some of the money collected today will go toward theological education for lay leaders; some will go to seminarians, and some will go toward recruiting and training ministers from diverse backgrounds.

This year, our UUA is requesting that each congregation send \$56 per member, to help support its good work. Until recently, our congregation always paid its full “Fair Share.” The last few years, we’ve only sent about one half-to-two thirds of our Fair Share. We hope and intend to put the full fair share amount into our proposed operating budget for next year.

And, this is a different collection. This “Association Sunday” offering is expressly for the programs of theological education, for lay and clergy leaders, that I mentioned. The “Association Sunday” collection will now be received.

{offering} Thank you for your generosity.

FIRST READING Philip Levine was born in Detroit, in 1928. He began writing poetry as a teen-ager, and has since won two National Book Awards and the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1995.

On My Own

Yes, I only got here on my own.
Nothing miraculous. An old woman
opened her door expecting the milk,
and there I was, seven years old, with
a bulging suitcase of wet cardboard
and my hair plastered down and stiff
in the cold. She didn't say, "Come in,"
she didn't say anything. Her luck
has always been bad, so she stood
to one side and let me pass, trailing
the unmistakable aroma of badger
which she mistook for my underwear,
and so she looked upward, not
to heaven but to the cracked ceiling
her husband had promised to mend,
and she sighed for the first time
in my life that sigh which would tell
me what was for dinner. I found my room
and spread my things on the sagging bed:
and bright ties and candy striped shirts,
the knife to cut bread, the stuffed weasel
to guard the window, the silver spoon
to turn my tea, the pack of cigarettes
for the life ahead, and at last
the little collection of worn-out books
from which I would choose my only name-
Morgan the Pirate, Jack Dempsey, the Prince
of Wales. I chose Abraham Plain
and went off to school wearing a cap
that said "Ford" in the right script.
The teachers were soft-spoken women
smelling like washed babies and the students
fierce as lost dogs, but they all hushed
in wonder when I named the 400 angels
of death, the planets sighted and unsighted,
the moment at which creation would turn
to burned feathers and blow every which way
in the winds of shock. I sat down
and the room grew quiet and warm. My eyes
asked me to close them. I did, and so
I discovered the beauty of sleep and that
to get ahead I need only say I was there,
and everything would open as the darkness
in my silent head opened onto seascapes
at the other end of the world, waves
breaking into mountains of froth, the sand
running back to become salt savor
of the infinite. Mrs. Tarbox woke me
for lunch-a tiny container of milk
and chocolate cookies in the shape of Michigan.
Of course I went home at 3:30, with
the bells ringing behind me and four stars

in my notebook and drinking companions
on each arm. If you had been there
in your yellow harness and bright hat
directing traffic you would never
have noticed me-my clothes shabby
and my eyes bright-; to you I'd have been
just an ordinary kid. Sure, now you
know, it's obvious, what with the light
of the Lord streaming through the nine
windows of my soul and the music of rain
following in my wake and the ordinary air
on fire every blessed day I waken the world.

SECOND READING Ginger Andrews was born in North Bend, Oregon in 1956.

Down on My Knees cleaning out my refrigerator and thinking about writing a religious poem that somehow combines feeling sorry for myself with ordinary praise, when my nephew stumbles in for coffee to wash down what looks like a hangover and get rid of what he calls hot dog water breath. I wasn't going to bake the cake

now cooling on the counter, but I found a dozen eggs tipped sideways in their carton behind a leftover Thanksgiving Jell-O dish. There's something therapeutic about baking a devil's food cake, whipping up that buttercream frosting, knowing your sisters will drop by and say Lord yes they'd love just a little piece.

Everybody suffers, wants to run away, is broke after Christmas, stayed up too late to make it to church Sunday morning. Everybody should

drink coffee with their nephews, eat chocolate cake with their sisters, be thankful and happy enough under a warm and unexpected January sun.

SERMON When I was growing up, one of my favorite television programs was on Friday night. On WJW, from Cleveland, the "Hoolihan and Big Chuck" show featured bad monster movies and funny bits like a giant floating head, singing in the closet, and occasional prizes for listeners. One of the most common features of "Hoolihan and Big Chuck" was the "Certain Ethnic" joke. It was pretty obvious which "certain ethnicity" they were talking about: like many Clevelanders, Big Chuck Schodowski's family came from Poland.

Still, I remember thinking that the "certain ethnic" description was a good one—it was at least less offensive than naming a specific ethnicity, and even at 10 or 11 years old, I knew that almost everybody had some group that they preferred to tell jokes about.

I owned a book of Polish jokes, and a book of Italian jokes and I knew a couple jokes that I had heard told about different groups—same joke, different "certain ethnicity." Growing up in Ohio, I heard jokes about people living in Kentucky, and people from West Virginia, and—alas—people from Michigan. And many of those folks told the same jokes about people from Ohio.

I also heard other jokes, although not as frequently. My parent's friends and neighbors would not tell these jokes when they could see children around. And their voice would change. Unlike the Polish and Michigan jokes, these jokes seemed to have a more serious undercurrent.

Whereas the other jokes were known to be jokes, these other kind seemed to be reinforcing some dangerous line, some important boundary between "us" and "them." Whereas most people knew that not all Poles, or not all Italians, or not all Michiganders adhered to stereotypical behavior, the tellers of these other jokes seemed to believe the stereotypes. And when they met somebody of this "certain ethnicity," then their interactions were affected by these jokes and fears. Instead of meeting another human being, with all of his or her individual strengths, and all of her or his weaknesses, they met a one-dimensional "certain ethnic" caricature.

It is the 21st century, and still such stereotypes and misunderstandings persist.

The current issue of "Gospel Today" magazine has been pulled from the shelves of over 100 Lifeway Christian bookstores. Because the cover story is called "Breaking the Glass Ceiling," and the cover picture shows five female pastors, the Lifeway stores, which are owned by the Southern Baptist Convention, have placed the magazines under the counter. The mere image of women clergy is too dangerous and objectionable to be shown openly.

On my way to and from my classes at seminary, I passed a car with a bumper sticker that read, "Ordain women, or don't baptize them." In the Christian faith, baptism is a sacrament; it is the ritual by which the Holy Spirit enters a person—any person. Ordination is also a sacrament; but it is open, according to some Christian traditions, only to men. I appreciate the sentiments of the bumper sticker, but I was always afraid that some person or group, rather than beginning to ordain women into ministry, would follow the other half of the statement, and stop baptizing them.

The headline of Friday's *Record-Eagle* was "Student charged in alleged racial assault." A Traverse City Central High School student assaulted another student using racial slurs. After the first student attacked, several others joined in, and the victim was "bleeding profusely" by the time it was over. Central High is less than two miles from where we are sitting, right now.

In the debate between the candidates for the Vice Presidency, both people asserted that they supported the rights of same-sex couples to insurance benefits, visitation rights, and co-ownership...right before they both spouted that they absolutely believed that *marriage* must be defined as one man and one woman.

Meanwhile, two days ago, our UUA president issued a statement applauding the decision by the Connecticut Supreme Court which affirmed that "marriage" must be open to same-sex couples. President Sinkford wrote, "On behalf of the Unitarian Universalist Association, I rejoice today at the Connecticut Supreme Court's decision to end discrimination in the state's marriage laws and to grant the freedom to marry to same-sex couples. While civil unions have provided some legal protection over the past three years in Connecticut, they cannot confer the dignity and respect that comes with marriage. We know from our nation's painful history that separate is never equal."

That is the kind of more and ethical leadership that makes me proud to say that I am a Unitarian Universalist.

Now, like many other things in Unitarian Universalism, there is a debate around our Seven Principles. Some people believe that they are too close to a creed, and that they are inappropriate and too restrictive for our noncreedal faith. Others believe that they are too bland and general, that they do not say enough about who we are and what we support in this world. There is even a commission exploring our principles to see if we should add or change some things about them. We will talk more about all of these issues, as our sermon series progresses.

For now, let me just say that I appreciate the power and simplicity of this first principle. I do affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Women should be allowed and encouraged to be spiritual leaders. People who are strongly committed should be allowed to marry. Children should not be beaten because of the color of their skin. All of these moral sentiments follow from our first principle.

Just a bit over ten years ago, now, a young man thought he had made some new friends. Unfortunately for him, his "new friends" could not see beyond the jokes they told, could not see the compassion in his eyes, could not see the pain in his heart, could not see Matthew Shepard as an imperfect-but-trying *human being*, and they tied him to a fence post and beat him unconscious and left him to die.

As preparations were made, for Matthew's funeral, the fanatic Fred Phelps and a few of his venom-filled followers came to town, to picket. I won't dignify their cause by quoting them too much, but I will say that some of their signs began with the words "God hates..." which, according to my universalist understanding, are two words which simply do not go together.

When they learned that Phelps and his followers planned to picket Matthew's funeral, when they learned that fanatics were going to spew hatred and condemnation at family members and friends in their time of greatest sorrow, a young woman in the town enlisted a few friends and made long white gowns, with large droopy sleeves, and they went to the funeral and stood between the picketers and the mourners

and raised their arms in silent support and with their bodies and their sleeves shielded the funeral attendees from the hatred being spewed at them.

These young people knew that Matthew Shepard—and his family and friends—possessed inherent worth and dignity.

Russell Arthur Henderson and Aaron James McKinney, who are serving life sentences for murdering Matthew, also possess inherent worth and dignity. We all struggle in this world, to make good choices despite our fears and resentments. Their actions were deplorable, and they must face the consequences, and we must still endeavor to find the human worth inside them.

Even Fred Phelps has inherent worth. I disagree with virtually everything that man says, and I know in my heart that I am called to acknowledge his inherent dignity.

I do not know what happened to Phelps as he grew up. I do not know why it is important to his self-understanding to condemn others so vehemently. I suspect that part of it may be that he was the recipient of similar abuse from somewhere. Perhaps, some adult in his life, sometime, accused young Fred of being tainted by Original Sin, of being unavoidably headed for an eternity of torment unless he repented of his wickedness... Perhaps that poison poured into his ears eventually reached his heart and mind and festered into the sickness he demonstrates today.

I do not know what happened to Phelps; I just wish that no child would ever have to hear that she or he is sinful.

At our Unitarian Universalist General Assembly, this past June, the Rev. Ms. Victoria Safford quoted another minister, William Sloan Coffin, the great preacher of Riverside Church. She said he “asked a beautiful question: ‘Who tells you who you are?’- which is another way of asking what covenants you’re bound by, who harbors you and whom you harbor. He said some people rely on money to tell them who they are, and it’s a desperate standard. Some rely on status or power or position, and some need enemies to tell them who they are (“Whatever I am, I am not that” – a small and cynical defining). Too many of us, too often, he said, allow our own mistakes to tell us who we are. We look through the murky lens of shame or regret at our own shabby jumble of stumbles and sins and define ourselves by these alone. No other measure will convince us. There is grandiosity in such delusion.

Who tells you who you are?

Coffin responded by quoting the prophet Isaiah: ‘I have called you by name. You are mine, saith the Lord.’ For him, a Christian preacher, this meant, ‘For one thing, you never have to prove yourself. God’s love is poured out universally on everyone, from the Pope to the loneliest wino on the planet; God’s love doesn’t seek value, it creates it. Our inherent value is a gift, not an achievement. So you never have to prove yourself, with money or power or perfection. You only need express yourself, and abundantly return the love you’ve been given so abundantly.’ He was preaching the core of universalism, the radical and not so new idea that everyone is worthy, everyone belongs, not by virtue of anything we’ve done, or anything we’ve earned or own, but by virtue of what we are, which is human, which is inherently dignified, which is beloved.”

For those of us, who do not use God language, the message is the same: we are human beings, and as such, we have worth and dignity inherently, it is simply part of us. It is a fact, not an achievement. We never have to prove ourselves, with perfection or power or money or connections or...anything. We need only to express ourselves, with compassion and courage, and abundantly return the love that is so prevalent in the world.

So may we be.

BENEDICTION The poet wrote: “Everybody suffers; everybody wants to run away,” at least once in a while...Everybody is a combination of strength and weakness, good and evil, love and fear...everybody has bad moments and good moments. And with all of that, each and every one of us has inherent worth and dignity. The light of love does shine through the nine windows of our soul. Even if those windows get closed, even when they are broken, the light is still present in us. May everybody feel their inherent value, so that we can be thankful and happy enough, under the October sun.

So may we be.