

7 PRINCIPLES SERVICE
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
March 22, 2015

(At this lay-led service, seven speakers gave personal reflections on our seven principles. Their reflections were interspersed with the congregation's singing of songs related to each principle.)

Principle 1 (by Paula Greenwood)

"The Inherent worth and dignity of every person."

We, the member congregations of the Canadian Unitarian Council, covenant to affirm and promote: The inherent worth and dignity of every person.

The kids' version of this is: We believe that each and every person is important.

When I am here, I am home. I felt that way from the first time I attended a service almost 20 years ago. The principles offer me a prescriptive for living for "deeds, not creeds."

I chose this principle because it seems straight forward, simple. Of course I affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person....don't I?

Well, truth be told, this is sometimes a tough one for me. There are people who are damaged, complicated, hurt, and choose violence. I can set myself apart and say that I wouldn't make those choices. How dare I?

I am learning. I am learning that when lives are complicated, choices aren't always possible. That I am a person of privilege and have rarely felt unaccepted; and that it is up to me to speak my own voice. So, I try to move towards being a more generous-hearted person who can affirm and covenant the worth and dignity of every person with the help of this community.

Hymn: *When in Our Music God is Glorified* #36

Principle 2 (by Andrew Wilton)

"Justice, equity and compassion in human relations."

When I read the word Justice in this principle I immediately thought of Dr. Martin Luther King, this is what he wrote from the Birmingham jail:

"We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have never yet engaged in a direct action movement that was "well timed" according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "wait." It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This "wait" has almost always meant "never." It has been a tranquilizing thalidomide, relieving the emotional stress for a moment, only to give birth to an ill-formed infant of frustration. We must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that "justice too long delayed is justice

denied." August 1963

Here I stand before you the privileged of the privileged. A white, middle aged, straight, male. What can I offer you concerning justice equity and compassion in human relations? For 27 years I have had the honour to work with young people as a teacher in local elementary schools. Over the years I have noticed children's deep sense of justice, equity, and compassion. Young people are upset incredibly easily when they notice any indiscretion against any of these ideals. I've realized that these three concepts are something we are born with. Sadly, it seems society slowly leaches these ideals out of many people's belief systems and like our belief in the wondrous that we have when we are young we forget. I am lucky to witness this strong sense in young people because it makes me think about myself, the privileges I have and the lack of justice, equity, and compassion I see around me. The question I now ask myself is "what actions can I take, even baby steps to become a better person than the one I was yesterday?" and every day I try to reach my goal.

In closing here is a poem about first steps: *Suppose* by Stephen Shick

Suppose you cried a thousand years
for a child who died when she drank bad water.
Suppose you organized a great movement
to clean the water.
Suppose you carried the first filled glass
to the child's sister. Suppose you lifted it to her lips.
Suppose you watched her dive into the glass,
splash, and swim on.

Hymn: *We are Sunshine in the Streets* ~ David Burrows

Principle 3 (by Marion Habermehl)

"Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth."

I selected the 3rd Principle: "Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth." It's a principle I must say always requires work from me, not that I always keep it in mind. But I selected it because of how fundamental I experience it to be. When I am mindful of being accepting of another person, it changes my relationship with them. I let go of my expectations for them to be a certain way and I discover there's more there, in them and within me, and in that space we create together. Life provides me with many opportunities to practice this principle, thank goodness, because I need lots of opportunities!

I recently joined a new group. When I met the group my first impression of everyone was very good, except for one person. I had an immediate not-positive private reaction to her, which really didn't change over the weeks. When the time came to partner up on an outing and she asked me if we could go together, I resisted my impulse to refuse, and instead offered myself an opportunity to work on acceptance of another person. I

did a lot of self-talk to help myself overlook her very annoying mannerisms, and I worked at listening to what she found important. It was a good challenge, and I was thrilled that the work worked! Though many things were personal triggers for me, I hung in there and I eventually experienced her to be very generous and kind to me. I don't expect we'll ever be "besties", but I would count her among my group friends and I got to practice accepting another person in a situation that wasn't personally easy for me.

It's in my participation in different communities, including the one here at UFP, that I am consistently called to practice accepting others. When I commit to participating and entering into relationships with others, I get to practice acceptance. When I practice acceptance I am facilitating spiritual growth within myself and supporting it in others. My own practice feels like a slow process, a life-long pursuit, but in this community I feel accepted to plug away at it at the pace I can manage, and for that I am grateful. Together, here, we make the space for all of us to practice our third principle.

Hymn: *Rivers of Grace* ~ Carla Gates

Principle 4 (by Ben Wolfe)

"A free and responsible search for truth and meaning."

Was anyone else here kind of an unusual kid?

Any hands for that? [*More than a scattering of hands raised.*]

There are lots of ways of being unusual. Mine included watching the Watergate hearings for fun when I was 10, and being a bit younger and a lot shorter than everyone else, and being co-president of the high school stamp club, and being thrilled to get an album called *The Greatest Hits of 1720* as a gift when I was 13 or 14.

Do you remember when you become yourself, or how you did it?

That's what Principle 4 is about. It's about feeling what's true, and following it.

Knowing what you love and what matters to you, and following it.

I love the 7 Principles. They work for me. But here's the thing. The map is not the territory. The principles aren't a set of rules to adopt, and memorize, and train yourself to live by. They're the distilled essence of human experience. They're the hard-won discoveries actual people made by living, and found ways to express to themselves, and then to others, in finer and finer terms, in better and better words, until they took the form they're in now.

The principles were written in the way Principle 4 suggests: by the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. And they too will change, as deeper meanings and better words are found.

There's an idea in science I love, called a "strange attractor." It's a hidden pattern a system organizes itself around. The behaviour of the system can be complex and chaotic: it seems to be all over the map. But it has a hidden centre or centres.

The truth is a strange attractor. You will never get there, but you know when you are circling it and getting closer.

The right way to live is a strange attractor. You know it's right because you will choose that way even when it is harder, even when it is the road less travelled by, even when other people's truths and meanings are laid out all around you, free for the taking, whole systems of them.

One part of my work right now is a project called The Peterborough Dialogues. I call it my work though I'm not getting paid for it, at least not yet.

It's about new forms of leadership and community, found and created together by people who have had no choice but to respond to a call to act on what they see happening to the world.

Creating it (by which I mean *co-creating* it) has been the most satisfying thing I've done in years. Putting out the call for it and having it answered over the last few weeks has been an incredible validation of Principle 4.

It's guided not by a specific mission but by a calling question. The question took two forms: "How do we create a local living oasis in a global storm of shifting sands." And, "What if we could awaken our deepest gifts and possibilities to cultivate a resilient, thriving Peterborough."

A close partner in the project sent me a text message a few days ago asking me to try to express the character of the people who have chosen to gather to try to make something new happen in Peterborough. Part of my answer was:

"The purest intention. A near-spiritual pull of pure possibility. An agenda that in many cases consists of no more than a thirst to be in the room with others who felt the same pull. An almost absurd certainty that miracles will result, and that none of us are responsible for arriving in the room carrying them.

"The space to work. The freedom to be ourselves as we discover what we want to do. Laughter, that will remove the weight from the seriousness of what we are attempting."

It should come as no surprise to anyone here that there are more Unitarians in the group than people from any other single community.

This is a poem you may not have heard, it's called "Finding My Way,"¹ and it seems appropriate to the first days of spring. It's about first finding yourself, and then finding your tribe.

i took the longer harder road
i carried too much of a load

i lost my way
i lost my will

¹ a little secret known only to readers of tiny footnotes: the reason you may not have heard it is i wrote it on thursday, in jackson park

and i am looking for them still
the search for them has turned me true
the hunt for them is what i do

i spend my days in song and prayer
the scent of them is in the air

and they were seeds
and it is spring

the world around me
starts to sing

as other seekers on the way
go hunting, through the selfsame day

Principle 4, people. For self, and for community.

Hymn: *Seek Not Afar for Beauty* #77

Principle 5 (by Sheena Howard)

“The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.”

How am I embodying our principle of the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large?

By admitting that I haven't always.

By humbly reporting, that I thought I was a believer in a feminist, egalitarian, socialist democracy. I trusted that I actively promoted the belief of one person, one vote, one say. That every voice deserved to be heard, and one should always follow where the conscience leads them.

And then – I had children.

And – suddenly – without me really questioning why – I didn't want these vulnerable, precious creatures to have an opinion, a conscience, a say, a vote. I wanted, no I needed them, to see it my way, to do things my way – or, I would simply force them to change their minds, their actions, their thoughts, using coercion and threats. I'm the parent. They're the kids. I know what is best for them.

I was directive and bossy:

Go pee before we leave.

Go brush your teeth before they turn black and fall out. (and a liar)

Give your Grama a hug

Use your quiet voice.

We are leaving in 10 minutes.

I don't care if you want to ski, play hockey, go tobogganing – its Sunday, and we

need some spirituality and we are going to the Fellowship.

And –

If you don't do these things, I'll take away your play time, your free time, fun time, your toys, and choose a nasty punishment, like picking up dog poo or grounding you.

Are you horrified? I was.

I couldn't believe that I could espouse all those democratic beliefs – but be an authoritative dictator to society's most vulnerable people, and to the greatest loves of my life. The very ones that I wanted to grow up knowing that they deserved to have the freedom to follow their own conscience, have a vote, and a say in the creation of their lives.

As I believe parenting is the longest meditation of my life – I searched and asked myself – am I embodying the principles I want to instill in my children? And after reflecting – discovered the process of Democratic Parenting. Then thru Family meetings, injecting choice, and choosing to actively implement and experience their choices with them – I can honestly say that I'm using my relationships with my children, and our little patients, as the opportunity to embody our 5th principle. They get a say in who, what, when, where and how.

I may not understand, or enjoy, that, to my children, on Sundays - skiing brings them more peace, grace, joy and a connection to the divine – than UFP – but, that is their conscience, their right to choose and their right to have a vote about the creation of their lives. At work, I may not appreciate why a child wants to be standing on their head while I examine them – and it's their body, and their choice to decide how I will interact with them in a vulnerable moment.

I leave you with these questions to ponder about our 5th principle: in what ways do you choose democracy with children? How do you support, and practice deep listening to hear children's needs of who, what, when, where and how? And, how do you work with the children to integrate their choices into our congregation and in to your personal lives?

Brightest Blessings and Thank You.

Hymn: *Here We Are Gathered* #360

Principle 6 (by Rosanna Pellizzari)

“The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.”

Unitarian Universalists covenant to affirm and promote the seven principles. What a gift it is to gather here each week to create, nurture and celebrate a community that grounds itself in a commitment to social justice. For there cannot be peace if there is not justice.

The work of justice, of social transformation, is a collective act. I, as an individual, can study, speak and act but alone I am a voice crying out in the wilderness. Together, we can be that mighty river called justice, flowing down like water to a dry and thirsty land.

Looking back at my life, the pursuit of a more just world has always been the fundamental expression of my search for meaning. It is fueled by a profound gratitude and a deep love of life itself. Talk is cheap – it is my work and my actions that matter. As Unitarian Universalists, our living tradition draws from many sources, including Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbours as ourselves. The Hebrew prophets, old testament scriptures like Amos, Jeremiah, Isaiah and Micah, have left us a rich legacy that essentially says that releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke, setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke, sharing our bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless is our call to action. Isaiah tells us that this is the fasting that will transform our hearts and souls. He adds “Then your light shall break forth like the dawn and your wound shall quickly be healed.”

The light is shining in this sanctuary. Vision, courage, passion, resilience, these are the gifts we give so generously to each other and, through us, to the world community.

Two weeks ago, Reverend Julie brought us words from Carter Heyward, a feminist theologian, to open our March 8th liturgy:

“Love is a conversion to humanity, a willingness to participate with others in the healing of a broken world and broken lives. Love is a choice to experience life as a member of the human family, a partner in the dance of life.”

Those words have been resonating with me these past two weeks as I prepared to speak to this principle. I find inspiration to work for a new world community of peace, freedom and justice by being part of this community. The lives, the actions, the prayers and yearnings of so many of you inspire me to be a more faithful and unrelenting advocate. Your light shines and helps lead the way. The Indigenous Working Group is one example where committed members of this community have been steadfastly learning and helping this community become an ally in the struggle of indigenous people in Canada to recover and flourish as equals. There are many more examples – in fact, sometimes Sunday morning announcements feel like speed-dating for justice and freedom.

It is this weekly re-affirmation that we pledge together that sealed my fate with this community. In making this work of transformation explicit, we hold each other accountable. In valuing the inherent worth of every person, nurturing relations that are characterized by justice, equity and compassion, respecting the interdependent web of existence of which we are part, and empowering each other to be full and equal members, by celebrating our differences, we will create a new world order for it is a mere extension of what is already real.

I know that I can be true to this principle, that I will be invited to dance, that I will find courage and inspiration, by being part of this community. I know that when I grow weary or distracted, or discouraged, I can count on you to take the lead. And when I feel strong or inspired, I will take my turn. For we are so much more than the sum of our parts when it comes to the struggles of people to be free and whole, the struggle to end discrimination, the struggle to end violence, the struggle to speak truth to power.

This principle of our faith compels us to stay vigilant. It encourages us to think globally, regardless of where our feet may be planted. It calls us to be bigger than who we are. To get outside of our comfort zone, to transcend our own realities to incorporate the bigger picture. May we continue to find ways to build this new world every day right here. Thank you for the many ways you make this principle alive and apparent.

Hymn: *If Every Woman in the World* #1026

Principle 7 (by Kathryn Waugh)

“Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

I grew up in Northern Ontario where my brothers and I spent most of our time, when not in school, outside. We had the free run of 80 acres of bush. Down near the edge of the swamp we had horses; our horses were young and bendable willow trees; we would each climb up our own tree until it bent over just right and then we would ride those bucking broncos to many fine adventures.

On some summer days I would lie down in the grass and watch the clouds go by, seeing faces and boats and islands and colours --all the shades of white and grey and blue.

On winter evenings I would plop down in the snow looking up at the stars and become dizzy-queasy thinking about how the earth I was lying on was spinning and moving through space - why couldn't I feel earth's motion? Most worrisome for me was how did the sun get set on fire and what will happen to me if it goes out?

Well starting school seems to have silenced those kinds of questions and wonderings.

Yet for all my life I have felt best when outside, whether I am digging in the dirt, planting something, breathing the fresh cool air, floating on water in my kayak, walking the shore of the lake looking for special stones and picking driftwood, sleeping in my cabin in the bush by the lake.

When I said yes to preparing this reflection, I thought I'd say something about my experiences of earth, air, fire and water and how respect for the interdependent web means acknowledging the essential unity of all creation.

Well my thoughts changed after I heard a poem last wed evening at a concert of spoken word poetry. I asked the poet whether I could use some of her words in this reflection and she said I could. Here are some excerpts from “They Want to Build a Mine” by

Sasha Patterson. It's about a Canadian mining company that wants to build a mine in a pristine area of Central America:

(Poem omitted as we get Sasha's permission to print poem)

How will I take action? I was startled and shaken by her powerful words. In Sasha's words I heard an echo of Hildegard of Bingen who, 1000 years ago, said that nature teaches wisdom and manifests the interdependence of all.

Hildegard said that the ultimate sin is ecological sin; sin against the earth, the air and the water, she said when we injure creation's interdependent balance, we destroy all life including our own.

Hearing Sasha's poem the same week that I was writing this reflection has made me painfully aware that I am a complacent consumer of nature.

And to answer Sasha's question, I do not yet know what action I will take.

I know now that I need to do whatever I can to preserve and protect bucking broncos and cloud islands for my grandchildren.

Hymn: *Keepers of the Earth* ~ Joyce Poley