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UUnderWorld

A NEWSLETTER FOR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST FREE THINKERS

**POST, POST UUA EDITION
AUGUST 2024**

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VOLUME 1, No. 4!

LETTER FROM A READER

Does Anyone Remember Farley Wheelright?

When I was new to liberal religion, Farley was a fixture at General Assembly. Any issue of import, he was the first in line at whatever microphone represented his support or lack of ... I was fascinated by his passion. His cronies, who often disagreed with him, took oppositional views or seconded his views. Most times their disagreements refined and clarified the issue(s). Every General Assembly, one could count on the Farley show!

These guys would yell and holler at each other. They seemed to dislike each other intensely, as a result of their differing views.

I was in my mid-twenties at the time, new to liberal religion. I found all this fascinating. I was surprised one night after a full day of GA discussion sessions where arguments were rancorous and steady through-out, I found a restaurant to have a bite to eat. As I was seated, I noticed a table with 6 or 7 older guys and recognized Farley as one of them. Looking more closely, I saw some of the other men seated at the table were guys who had argued pro and con at GA with him, all afternoon. I watched them, eat, talk, argue and laugh with each other. At one point I realized that these guys loved each other and they loved the process of making sure the pros and cons of every issue made it to the General Assembly floor. The process to them was as important as the issues presented.

This is no longer current in the UUA. The UU World no longer has any issue discussions. Letters to the editor no longer exist. The Board of the UUA has members who are vetted to certain agreed upon views. Nowhere in our religious home is there any discussion worthy of free speech.

I happened upon several discussions between UUs on facebook recently, and the writers were dissing several people who did not toe the UUA party line---something about pro-nouns. A UU person apparently did not understand the new usage of "they" and the response was critical and disparaging. Total rejection and this person should be ejected from our faith...

I am aware that in our present UUA we do not value discussion, disagreement and the learning and growth real exchange can bring. How can we

learn if we cannot talk to one another and learn about the current issues? I want to know both sides and every issue in the middle. In debate team practice, we were forced to learn both sides and be able to articulate an issue from several points of view. Shouldn't faith have some of that? I want to know why I believe as well as the how, where differing views came from and what it means to make a choice to believe as I do.

In our current world hatred is the companion of differing beliefs. Disagree, hate comes your way! Do not understand? Well, get thee out Satan.

My granddaughter who was seven at the time, was part of a summer camp. One of the speakers was a young woman, who was although not trans, was dressed and styled as masculine. My granddaughter raised her hand. "Are you a boy or a girl?" Around my granddaughter, other older students were aghast. "How could she ask such a thing?" The speaker answered. "What a brave young person you are! I was born a girl. However, I feel best about myself when I dress like a boy. Thank you for asking!" Later my grand-children and I had a discussion about gender. I was thankful for the speaker's gentle response. I wondered, how do we create the environment where it is okay to ask questions or not to know something and be able to find out---without being dissed or hated or excluded for not knowing? I want to go back to a world where discussion and hatred are not assured companions.

In short, I miss Farley Wheelright! Just to argue and to still like someone whose views challenge my own would make us all better humans and believers. That used to be one of the greatest strengths of our faith. I remember the very popular curriculum, "Disagreements That Unite Us". My congregation loved learning about differing views. Truthfully, I miss those days.

--The Rev Ms Denise D Tracy



WE WON'T FORGET Seven Principles

We affirm and promote
UU's Seven Principles:

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person
2. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations
3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning
5. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large
6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all
7. Respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are all a part

LETTERS FROM READERS

The Seven Principles Had to Go

Okay, I never saw the principles as theology because there's no reference to divinity of any kind. However, they are statements of belief about how we see the world and hope to act in it, so in the broader sense maybe they are theological.

And that's the reason we had to get rid of them. UUs no longer believe in individualism. Neither do they believe in the primacy of reason in seeking knowledge. So Principle 4 had to go because it addresses the individual search for truth and meaning. Others had to go because they express concern for the outside world (e.g., peace) instead of the mental masturbation required to "dismantle oppression in ourselves and our institutions."

So while we continue to flay ourselves in the search for that white supremacy culture that lies in the heart of every UU (especially older ones) and cancel the people and views that "offend," our numbers will continue to drop. I do not see post-modernism social justice ideology and liberal religion coalescing. Which one will hold? Will UU exist at all in 2040?

BTW, it's interesting to note that while social justice ideology aims for diversity and inclusion, the methods seem exclusive. Covenants focus on identifying and rewarding the "faithful" and punishing the wicked.

--Pat Mohr

New Bylaws

Okay, so I finished reading the thing [Article 2], and it ends up by saying, "Guys, I know you think that the bylaws must have been pretty good, by and large. But they're so bad, we're going to have to overhaul the whole thing." That's like saying the Constitution is such a bad document that we just have to start all over again from scratch!

I think it's going to be a way to hide the stealing of congregational polity, i.e., freedom of congregations and congregants to run their churches the way they see fit. And if they come up with another gobbledygook rewrite, it will be easier to hide the theft.

The UUA is not to be trusted, for the foreseeable future, based on the things we've learned they been doing in the recent and not-so-recent past (e.g., one document they mentioned, the "Widening Circle of Concern" is full of racist poison). Motto in the works: **GET AWAY FROM THE UUA!**

Terri Keller, Georgia



WATCH YOUR CHURCH'S ASSETS!

The Association's Backdoor Way of Owning Your Church

As I understand it, this is how it works. If a congregation affiliated with the UUA after a certain date, they were required to put a clause in their bylaws that their assets would revert to the UUA if they "ceased to exist". Before that date it was not required but it was "requested" and is commonly in many church bylaws.

If a congregation borrowed from the UUA (a mortgage) or received some other benefits, they were required to add the reversion clause.

What this means is that each congregation MUST read their own bylaws and figure this out themselves.

If a congregation changes their bylaws in anticipation of closing, or if a congregation donates assets to another organization or otherwise disposes of property that would have gone to the UUA under the bylaws, the congregation's trustees are on the hook to pay the UUA the value of those diverted assets.

The UUA Board has a policy on how the assets from church closures are to be used.

As far as the UU Common Endowment Fund--there is no question about this. If any funds are managed by the UUA Common Endowment Fund¹ and the congregation ceases to exist or simply withdraws, or expresses an intent to withdraw, all invested money becomes the property of the UUCEF. This is because the UUCEF can only hold money that is pledged to the benefit of the UUA. The UUCEF has a fiduciary responsibility to see that the donor's intent for their money to benefit the UUA is carried out. If a congregation withdraws from the UUA they are indicating that they are no longer interested in "benefiting the UUA." If the UUCEF gave the money back to the congregation they would not be working on behalf of the donor. The money would be going to other purposes.

This actually is a burden of the congregation, too. Did the donor give the money to further the aims of the UUA, or to benefit the local congregation? Splitting hairs? Be careful. What was the donor's intent?

A congregation may withdraw money from the UUCEF for many reasons, but not with the intent to withdraw from the UUA.

Below is the UUA policy on dissolutions, posted after the June 6, 2024 UUA Board of Trustees meeting.

It reads, in part, "once received by the UUA, assets from its dissolving member congregations should be distributed as follows:

- A. On request of the congregation, up to 25% to outside nonprofit organizations whose missions are aligned with those of the congregation. The majority of this distribution must be to UU congregations or UUA related organizations...
- B. 25% to the UUA's New UU Communities fund...
- C. 25% to the UUA held within the Unitarian Universalist Common Endowment Fund LLC,
- D. 25% flexible, based on congregational circumstance...

--Rebecca Pace

¹ Rule 3.3.5, on Rules and Regulations for New Congregations - "A congregation shall include in its articles of incorporation or other organizing documents a clause providing that the assets of the congregation will be transferred upon dissolution to the Association. Notwithstanding the foregoing, if a congregation obtains the prior written consent of the Association's Board of Trustees, the congregation may name an organization that is affiliated with the Association (such as a district, camp, conference center or other congregation) as the recipient of the congregation's assets upon dissolution."



FROM A READER

Rules and Principles

For all organizations of member groups, there exists a common set of words, statements, or beliefs that bind the organization writ large together. For all the examples {one can} cite, including the Congregationalists who wrote the Cambridge Platform, that document was Scripture. No individual church ever considered adding a sixth book to the Pentateuch or substituting another book for the Bible.

The concept of member groups being free to conduct their own affairs but still agreeing to abide by one set of overarching statements/ laws/ rules, as originally presented in the Cambridge Platform forms the basis for our U.S. government structure, as well as something as mundane as Major League Baseball. Both states and teams run their own businesses, yet no team in MLB can decide on their own to add a fourth strike or a 10th player to the field. The rules of baseball preside. And no state can add a law contrary to the Constitution.

UU used to have a similar structure when the Principles in Article II served as that common agreed to document. All members covenanted to affirm and promote all seven of them. That changed when the UUA praised individual churches for “adopting” an 8th Principle as a worthy “grassroots” effort while ignoring the procedures in Article XV of the UUA Bylaws for adding a principle.

Congregational polity allows churches to run their own operations and to put whatever statements they want in their own bylaws. However, when those statements are specifically called a “principle,” instead of other terms like a “statement of conscience” or a “congregational resolution,” the intent is to make them equivalent to the statements in Article II. They are not. By ignoring the procedures in Article XV, the UUA leaders

weakened their own bylaws. If you can ignore one, you can ignore others.

The freedom and flexibility we want and claim, is still available today is robbing the UUA of unity and cohesion and diminishing its power to affect any significant change beyond the local level.

--Steven J Myles



READY TO GO DEEPER?

Longer Articles at the End of This Issue

Don't forget to check out several longer articles at the end of this newsletter—starting on page 10. They are a bit longer than the short pieces at the beginning of the issue, but they might spur more involved thinking. Plus space is unlimited! Got a topical essay you'd like to share? Send it in! Send to: UUnderWorld74@gmail.com



"Jesus, Save me from your followers."



Henry & Baruch
by David Cyclebac



NAUA's First Annual Summit

Come join us for NAUA's First Annual Summit.
Your voice, presence, and company is wanted.

Join the Summit in person, or online.

Registration can be found on NAUA's home page: NAUnitarians.org

Early registration before Sept 1 is discounted!

Not a member of NAUA? Not a problem- Joining NAUA is free at NAUnitarians.org

Summit Location:

Unitarian Universalist Church of Spokane, Spokane, WA.

Summit Hotel: Oxford Suites, Spokane, WA. (To get conference discount, use registration link in NAUA's Summit webpage)

Summit Dates: Thursday, October 17 to Sunday, October 20, 2024

Activity highlights:

Keynote Speaker Saturday: Dr. Stephen Hassen, *Cults & Freedom of Mind*

Sample Workshops –

Losing Your Religion: Moving Toward Healing (Candace Schmidt and Lynn Jinishian)

Kercera – The Art of Being Thoughtful (Rev. Dr. Todd Eklof)

Visioning NAUA's Future (Judi Durham)

Table Discussions – Your input is wanted!

1. **NAUA's Academy**

2. **Growing NAUA Membership & Creating new Fellowships.**

3. **Increasing NAUA's in Person and Online Interactions.**

Business Meeting – During this meeting you will be asked to vote on the first official NAUA Bylaws, and for the first official NAUA Board.

Dear **NAUA** Members,

We hope you decide to participate in this first annual NAUA Summit. Also knowing that there are many folks who voted against the UUA changes, and perhaps are not sure what to do now, we hope you will pass this flyer on to them and encourage them and their congregations to become NAUA members and participate in the Summit. Folks do not need to leave their UU congregations to do so.

THE NEW ARTICLE 2

Got An Accountability Story?

The recently approved Article 2 section in the UUA bylaws speaks very clearly about congregations being “accountable.” Specifically:

“As Unitarian Universalists, we covenant, congregation-to-congregation and through our Association ... are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values.”

To be sure, the word *accountable*, that sticks out so prominently in the document, *never* appeared in the old bylaws. The leadership has repeatedly said that every word was chosen carefully, which begs the question, Why was it *added*? Why was this new accountability needed now in the Unitarian Universalist community? What benevolent purpose could being held ‘accountable’ by others help in the old *responsible search for truth and meaning*?

Perhaps we can look to the words of the now UUA president, who said in 2022:

“Covenant without consequences is not actually covenant. We have to be willing to say 'No' in UU spaces. We have to be willing to say to each other ‘you are out of covenant right now.’ You are so out of covenant that you cannot be back in this community until you are willing to do the work of repair. Universalism promises that there is always a path of return when you are ready. But we do not wallow in harm until you are ready to do the work. We will be here when you are ready to do the work. You cannot break this community over and over again out of, whatever it is, trauma fear, anger, loss, despair. I mean those are pastoral issues. You can always come home but you got to come correct. That’s a covenant.”

So it seems that, and there are recent examples, thinking for one’s self is not going to be allowed any longer. Or at least not too far from the decreed doctrine. Concerns abound about who will be doing the judgment about who being “so far out of covenant”? Is there gonna be an Accountability Committee somewhere?

Some alarming anecdotal stories have appeared in the national dialogue about how this affects local members and their relationship to their congregation. Have you got a story? We’re compiling a list. Please send your story into UUnderWorld74@gmail.com.



NEW FEATURE!

Help Wanted Ads!

A recent communication from the UUA has highlighted a severe shortage of ministers willing to serve congregations. While there are ministers available, few are interested in accepting parish positions. A widely circulated letter from the UUA Transitions Director, who works with congregations and ministers seeking placements, dated June 23, 2023, emphasizes the seriousness of the situation. Noted in the letter: “For years, the Transitions Office would hear from about 25-30 newly fellowshiped ministers looking to consider congregational ministry. The last two years, it’s been 5 ministers, then 8.” The letter also advised many congregations that they may not be able to get a minister from the UUA and suggested considering hiring ministers from outside the UUA’s fellowshiping process and even outside of Unitarian Universalism.

The NAUA is developing a new portal to connect religious professionals with position openings. NAUA’s upcoming portal will be a much-needed tool to help liberal church congregations find suitable professionals.

In the meantime, UUnderWorld is creating free “**Help Wanted**” and “**Person Available**” resources for anyone interested, including Ministers, RE & Music Directors, and administrators. Send information to: UUnderWorld74@gmail.com



FAUX EDITORIAL

So I Found This Great Church...

A *fictional* newcomer and I had a *fictional* conversation the other day.

"Sorry I haven't been here for several months," she said. "I had a business engagement out of town, but I sure missed coming here on Sundays. I was learning so much about Unitarian Universalism.

"And I especially the concept that all are welcome here, whether or not we share the same set of beliefs, or no beliefs at all.

"I particularly like the concept of being able to build my own theology. It is nice to have a set of principles and sources that many UUs agree.

"Nice also that there are people here who are environmentalists, humanists, fair housing advocates, or LGBT+ folks, or maybe their focus is anti-racism, or a myriad of other causes. If they have a pet cause at all—not required to have one.

"Each church being independent is an added draw for me. Each congregation can decide how to operate and whether to call which minister.

"I know there is a national association, but I like that it is only there to service us when needed, but doesn't decree what we are supposed to believe.

"I understand that they are very democratic and churches have a way of electing the leadership and the local councils or districts.

"I did see an article while I was away, though, something about the president of the association was elected without opposition. And that the focus was much narrower. And that some ministers had been kicked out because their beliefs were not in line.



"There was some goofy looking cartoon I had never seen before. A pig? And some flower with different words than you showed me earlier. What's that about?"

I was so sorry that I had to explain the recent events that had changed so much of what I had told her before.

So many people, recent first comers, and long term UUs, had attended or even joined with with a totally different understanding of what Uuism was all about.

Sigh.

PLEASE FORWARD!

Be An UUnderWorld Paper Carrier!

It seems that many, or maybe even most, UUs didn't get the word of the many significant changes that occurred at GA24, or what those changes could mean to our religion.

Since there is no longer an easy way to express non-conforming, dissenting views to a wide audience of Unitarian Universalists, we have put this inelegant newsletter out to try and establish a platform where ordinary UUs can make their voices heard.

This is the 4th issue of a one-time effort (!), originally to try and stop the disastrous rewrite of Article 2, but it continues on, *zombie-like*, as an early attempt to deal with the aftermath.

One way we're trying to get the newsletter out to the rank-and-file congregants and independent UUs is by asking you, dear reader, to *please forward* this on to anyone and everyone you know, who might need to know, about the new direction our association is trying to lead us. Church emails lists, newsletters, discussion groups and the like.

UUnderWorld is in standard "pdf" format, and a pretty small file, so folks can open and read it as is.

If anyone wants to get a copy or back issues, join the small email list, send an article or letter, or anything else, they can send an email to

UUnderWorld74@gmail.com

An unhealed person
can find offense in pretty much
anything someone does.
A healed person
understands that the actions
of others have nothing to
do with them.
Each day you get to decide
which one you will be.

WAS IT RACIST?

AI Analysis of July 2024

UUnderWorld

The July issue was distributed and discussed by the board of my congregation. Some thought one of the longer articles was racist. I called upon an impartial source and asked docanalyzer.ai to analyze the full issue. Here is its conclusion:

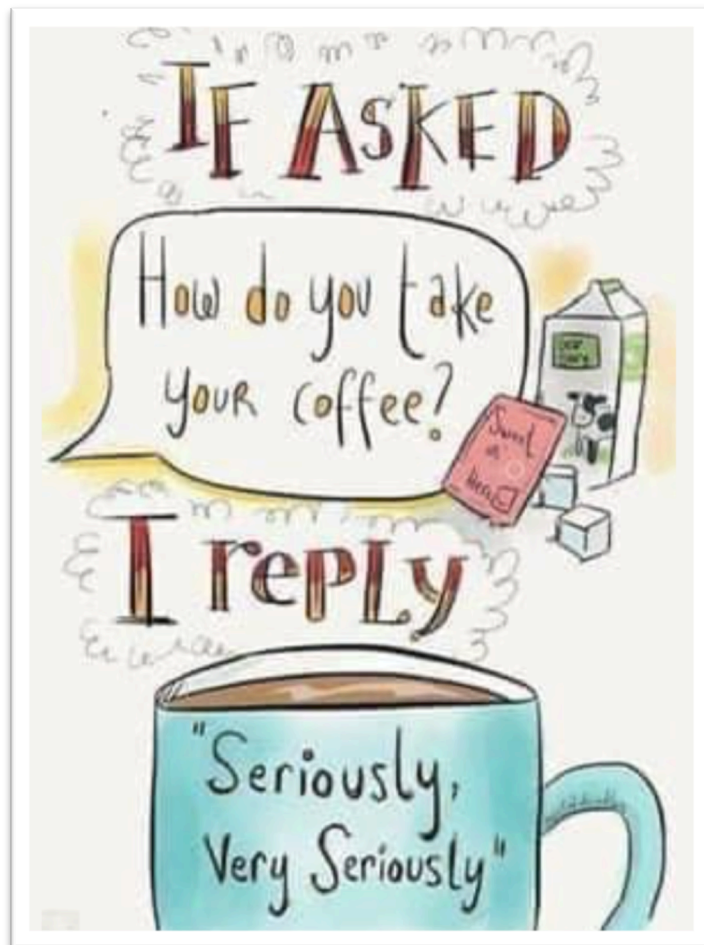
The document presents a critical perspective on anti-racism programs within the Unitarian Universalist Association, arguing that these programs may misinterpret the nature of racism and the experiences of white individuals. It discusses the emotional and moral complexities faced by individuals like the minister named Dan, who grapple with their actions in the context of societal pressures and racial dynamics ([page 25]).

The author critiques the notion that all whites are inherently racist, suggesting that this perspective can overlook the broader socio-economic realities and the diversity of experiences among white individuals ([page 22]). The document emphasizes the need for a more nuanced understanding of race, class, and community dynamics rather than a simplistic categorization of individuals based on race.

Overall, while the document critiques certain anti-racist approaches, it does not promote racist ideologies but rather seeks to challenge prevailing narratives within the

context of Unitarian Universalism.

Phileo, Steve Bottorff



As hard as it might be to believe, this is the **fourth** issue of **UUnderWorld**, which is lookin' like it will be thrown together, with any luck, *every single month*. While the original purpose was to draw attention to the major changes on tap at this year's General Assembly 2024, as long as there is interest, it continues on.

Still unqualified and replaceable editor is **John Griffin Miller**, a lifelong UU, with brand new Assistant Editor, **John A. Keohane**. Besides the bylined articles, we get lots of help from lots of others across the nation. Much info was gathered from, among other places, *The 5th Principle Project* and *Save The 7 Principles* websites and Facebook pages. If you would like to help out with future issues, please let us know.

As we try to make UUnderWorld as relevant and as widely read as possible, it is imperative that readers help forward the newsletter to friends and fellow UUs. Encourage input and items that will spur discussion from all corners.

Please send Letters to the Editor, submissions, input & suggestions, nasty comments, unsolicited praise, requests for a pdf of UUnderWorld current and past issues or other info to: UUnderworld74@gmail.com

PERSONAL THEOLOGY

Why I Am a Universalist in Theology

by John Keohane

I recommend to all the Devil's Dictionary, authored by that 19th century American, Ambrose Bierce. Among his definitions are those for Saint, Faith, and Universalist.

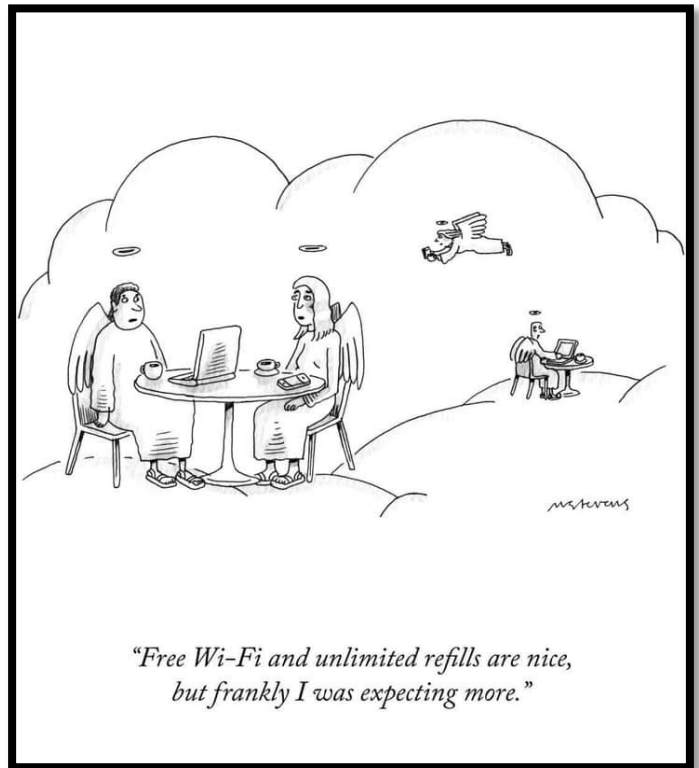
Saint—A dead sinner, revised and edited.

Faith—Belief without evidence in what is told by one who speaks without knowledge of things without parallel

Universalist—One who foregoes the advantage of a Hell for persons of another faith.

I am a Universalist in theology, that is in basic beliefs about life, death, and eternity. As Bierce suggested, I forego the advantage of a Hell for persons of another faith, but more than that, I have resolved something about my own desires for personal immortality. I have concluded that if any sort of personally conscious afterlife exists, it exists basically for all. Personally conscious afterlife has always been a more satisfying idea to me than vague talk of immortality in terms of the world we leave behind. This is especially true given the current beleaguered status of our world.

In resolving some of my own ideas about death, I have frequently felt tempted by certain dualistic religious groups. My two parents and one Irish grandfather, chose and were active in seven different denominations, albeit at different times in their lives. Their range included Catholic, Salvation Army, Southern Baptist, Dutch Reformed, Northern Baptist, Unitarian, and Episcopalian. I know that the fact of death means that each of us is in some sense on Death Row. That fact, that each of us will die, might prompt us to make more purposeful our lives in light of whatever future may or may not continue beyond the grave Personally I would particularly like a clear assurance of a future life for me, beyond this life on Earth. In fact, I've frequently felt tempted by certain purveyors of religion to buy into their eternity policies.



An eternity policy is a kind of insurance. For paying a premium, one is provided with a guarantee. In the case of eternity insurance, the premium is in time, energy, and money, as well as, in some cases, conformity in thought as well as deed. "Fighting your doubts", is an expression my fundamentalist grandparents used frequently, as well as that quote from John 3:16 that all who believe in Jesus Christ shall not perish but have everlasting life.

Ah, but believe what? Belief that the Bible is literally true, in all respects, presents a problem, if one reads carefully, unless one tries something like the Living Bible, which in the introduction to some printings states that it is a paraphrase based on a "rigid evangelical position". Even here is a problem for whoever knows or inquires as to what a paraphrase really is. If not the Bible, perhaps belief in "God's" representatives. Salvation by proxy, deferring to others who are wiser, more able, gifted with insight, or specially blessed. Still, being sheep to the shepherd does not fit activist adult human beings, and although a shepherd may ward off certain wolves, in the final analysis, he does not have the best

interests of the sheep in mind at all. This should be clear to all of us who eat mutton or lamb.

What then about eternity insurance? It's clear that paying the premium is not as easy as sending that check to Aetna, Prudential, or State Farm. Belief is a matter of what one is convinced is true, or likely to be true, or thinks possibly true.

The White Queen of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* told Alice that she could believe three impossible things before breakfast. Maybe she could, but Alice could not. I've always taken my own stand with Alice. It's Alice who said that one can't believe impossible things, to which the White Queen responded: "I daresay you haven't had much practice. When I was your age I always did it for half-an-hour a day." We know that people do believe impossible things, and have persecuted others for suggesting such heresies as alternative beliefs. Certain practices, such as the White Queen's daily efforts, may encourage belief, but they are not sufficient to make belief as easy as putting on a new set of clothes.

The purveyors of eternity insurance ask us to believe that we live in a dualistic world of saved and damned, elect and non-elect, Heaven and Hell. Frankly, I find it hard to buy into these dualisms, or to buy into their eternity policies, much as I might like to.

I believe that we live in a universalistic world, that whatever happens after we die, afterlife or no afterlife, and if afterlife, whatever happens for all. Frankly, I'm agnostic about afterlife, but universalistic in the faith that all human beings are in this together.

This is a kind of faith that whatever happens beyond the grave is secure, already secure. The relevant question is not finding salvation, but how we are living. Each should ask, and keep asking this, for him or herself. It involves weekly or monthly reexamination of our values and our lives. How are we living? Who are we becoming? How do we live, or fail to

live, those values which we profess to hold? If by their fruits ye shall know them, what values do we imply, by the daily living of our lives? Or are we mired down in the mechanics of the mundane? Do we claim that we've put our higher values "on the back burner", when we've really taken them off the stove? Do we reexamine our values from time to time, to see whether they remain real for us? Do we hold significant values, and live them in our lives?

Being a Universalist in theology, concentrates religious imperatives. All those resources which others would spend on eternity insurance, we can apply to life. This time, this energy, this money, should be devoted to living the best lives we can know.

John Keohane is a liberal in religion. He is active in on-line seminars at the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis, Minnesota, and lives in Texas.



FROM A READER

Why The Man in the Bear Suit

By Steve Myles

In a management training course years ago, we were shown a video. The instructor asked us to count the number of times people in the video passed a ball amongst themselves. Most folks in the class counted the same number of passes. None of us saw the man in the brown bear suit walking through the people in the video who were passing the ball around. When the video was replayed and we were cued to watch for it, he was completely visible. As the Simon and Garfunkel song says: "a man sees what he wants to see and disregards the rest." We were primed to look for something else and so it is with the Article II revision.

The direction we were given when the Revision was initially presented asked us to focus on just the Revision. The Article II Study Commission composed primarily of minorities asked us to “Read it the first time to observe how it makes you feel. Read it a second time, observe what it makes you think. Finally, read it a third time before thinking about any suggestions.” We were never asked to compare it to what we had. We were asked to focus on the passes of the ball, and we missed the man in the bear suit. Or at least we never talked about him. It was easy to get caught up in the specifics of words and phrases and miss the underlying premise for the revision.

The writers of the Article II revision used certain phrases which are key to its message. The writers had their focus with their biases. This is not to say we can’t agree with a particular statement or phrase. Rather, a majority white person would not have a reason to write such phrases. “Heal historic injustices”, “accountable to one another”, “work to repair harm and damaged relationships”, “covenant to learn from one another in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning”, “openness to change is fundamental to our UU heritages.” These phrases are the pleas of the marginalized to be heard in a church that is at least 85% white and presumed deaf.

But we are not deaf, and we are not heartless. The whole Article II revision process gave UUs an opportunity to hold a mirror to ourselves, but it was not allowed to happen freely. We were never given the opportunity to understand the reasons for the changes, how specific actions and words contribute to hurt feelings. We were never given the opportunity to understand how widespread these problems were in our communities. Instead, a defensive protection of the Article II Proposal emerged allowing autocratic actions, censorship of dissenting views, shunning of dissenters, and a reluctance to engage in back-and-forth

discussion. Fears of not being heard or overruled or fears of being labeled racist resulted in a poorly understood document that now serves as the basis of our faith.

As we now move into utilizing the new Article II, many congregations will struggle to assess if it adequately articulates the basis for a liberal religion that suits their needs? Does it provide room for all the many issues, causes, and beliefs that their congregants hold? Some congregations will find the Rewrite too restrictive focusing so prominently on dismantling racism. Some will find the implementations defined by the Article III rewrite too harsh, or being held accountable too subjective. Some will decide it is better for their congregations to continue using the 7 Principles and 6 Sources, which the UUA allows. Unfortunately, all the RE material their children will use and all the UUA published articles in UU World and UUA Websites their congregants will read will be focused on the new Values and the words of the new Article II. These congregations will find themselves out of step with the rest of UU.

Can they live with that? Will they begin to question the benefit of staying in the UUA? After all, why continue paying dues to an organization that no longer provides them with what they need? Time will tell. So, at some point in the future, when we look at what has happened from the perspective of the leaders of the UUA and the writers of the revised Article II, perhaps the harm they were so concerned with was not the problem. Maybe it is they who were focused on the wrong thing. Maybe it is they who missed the man in the bear suit, as congregation after congregation departs.



GUEST SERMON

A Defense of the First Principle*

Steve Sullivan

This guest sermon (or rather most of it) was presented at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Erie, PA on July 14th, 2024. I am a member of this congregation and an Associate Professor of Philosophy at PennWest University.

Preliminaries

We can all see the First Principle stenciled above us, and many—perhaps most!-- of us know it by heart: “the inherent dignity and worth of every person.”

This principle is presumably *first* among the Seven because it arguably provides the basis (at least in part) for the next five principles: the Second (“justice, equity, and compassion in human relations”), the Third (“acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations”), the Fourth (“the free and responsible search for truth and meaning”), the Fifth (“the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process...”), and the Sixth (“the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all”).

This principle is built into the longstanding Article II bylaws that were recently subjected to a thoroughgoing overhaul in the Revisions just given final approval at the June 2024 General Assembly.

What may not be obvious is that the word ‘inherent’ is crucial. It contrasts with *instrumental* worth or value, which something has in virtue of its usefulness. Note that *monetary* worth or value is instrumental: whatever possesses it may help the owner achieve other goals. For people to have *inherent* worth or value is for them to be valuable by their very nature as persons, not just because of their usefulness to others.

This idea is first emphasized explicitly by the 18th-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant in what is often called his respect-for-persons principle: human beings are to be treated as “ends in themselves”, not as mere means, and indeed are “priceless” and “irreplaceable.” It was arguably endorsed by the Universalist general assemblies of 1935 and 1953 with the wording “the supreme worth of every human personality.” It has often been treated as the basis of human rights, as in the 1948 United Nations Charter’s invocation of “the dignity and worth of the human person” and the 1987 U.N. Convention Against Torture’s of “the inherent dignity of the human person.” The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke repeatedly of “the dignity and worth of human personality” and made generous use of Kant’s respect-for-persons principle in condemning racial segregation and upholding racial equality. Finally, the Soldier’s Code of the U.S. Armed Forces includes the requirement to “treat others with dignity and respect.” This is just a small sample of the legacies of the Kantian idea that every person has inherent dignity and worth.

Why does the First Principle even need defense?

Well, in the Article II Revisions, which replace the Seven Principles with Six Values, the First Principle has been partly incorporated, with significant modification, into the value

of Equity. This value is given the following explanation: “We declare that every person is *inherently worthy* and has the right to flourish with *dignity*, love, and compassion” (emphasis added).

Why these changes? The Unitarian Universalist Association has provided two reasons that are supposed to undermine the First Principle.

First, the term “worth” in the First Principle is seen as “problematic” because of its past use in assigning a monetary value to slaves. (Members of Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism have raised this concern. The UUA has declared that the wording in question “harmed” these members.) Second, Rev. Dr. Sofia Betancourt (currently the President of the UUA) has rejected the Principle because its apparent creator, Kant, was a racist—indeed, she declares, he was “the founder of modern racism.” Presumably her idea is that the First Principle inherits or is otherwise tainted by Kant’s racism. Both of these objections to the First Principle deserve critical discussion.

Replies to the UUA criticisms

It ought to be clear that the slavery objection is utterly confused. As we have seen, the *inherent* worth of human persons, which they have by their very nature, is completely different from—indeed the opposite of— their *monetary or commercial* worth as market-able commodities. So it makes no sense to associate inherent worth with slavery. (I am by no means the only critic of the Article II Revisions to make this point.)

What is also confused, it seems to me, is the UUA’s acceptance of the idea that being *offended* by the wording of the First Principle amounts to being *harmed* by it. In his controversial but important book *The Gadfly Papers* (2019) Rev. Todd Eklof makes a strong case that this kind of conflation of offense with harm is a good illustration of what Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt call “safetyism” in their influential book *The Coddling of the American Mind* (2018). Indeed the central chapter of Eklof’s book is called “The Coddling of the Unitarian Universalist Mind.”

Rev. Dr. Betancourt’s criticism of the First Principle is not as quickly dismissible as the slavery objection. Immanuel Kant was indeed a racist—at least for much of his life—who believed in the profound superiority of white people to nonwhite people. Since I’m running out of time, let me cut to the chase and offer the following rebuttals—the third of which is much the most important.

(a) Betancourt ignores the evolution in Kant’s thought from common, crude racism to uncommon opposition to both slavery and colonialism.

(b) Even if we put aside his evolving views, it is doubtful that Kant deserves the title “father of modern racism.” If anyone in Europe did, it might well have been Karl Linnaeus (the creator of biological classifications) or David Hume (the Scots philosopher and author of the essay “Of National Characters”, published two decades before Kant’s “Of the Different Human Races”).

(c) As even most of my students can see, there is no good reason to reject Kant’s moral principles, such as respect for persons, on account of his racial prejudices (which were products of his time and culture). Analogously, we don’t and shouldn’t let Thomas Jefferson’s racism negate the moral rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for which he provided eloquent expression in the Declaration of Independence.* And it is no accident that the Kantian idea of the inherent worth and dignity of every person proved so helpful to Rev. Dr. King in his invaluable contributions to the civil-rights movement, as indeed it has to other social-justice movements in American history.

A final point about the importance of the First Principle

The Seven Principles are no longer part of the Article II bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association. But there is nothing to stop us from incorporating the Principles into the bylaws of our congregation. The case I have made for the importance of the First Principle is one piece of a bigger case for doing this. The optional addendum below is another piece.

Optional addendum on the incorporation of the First Principle into the Value of Equity

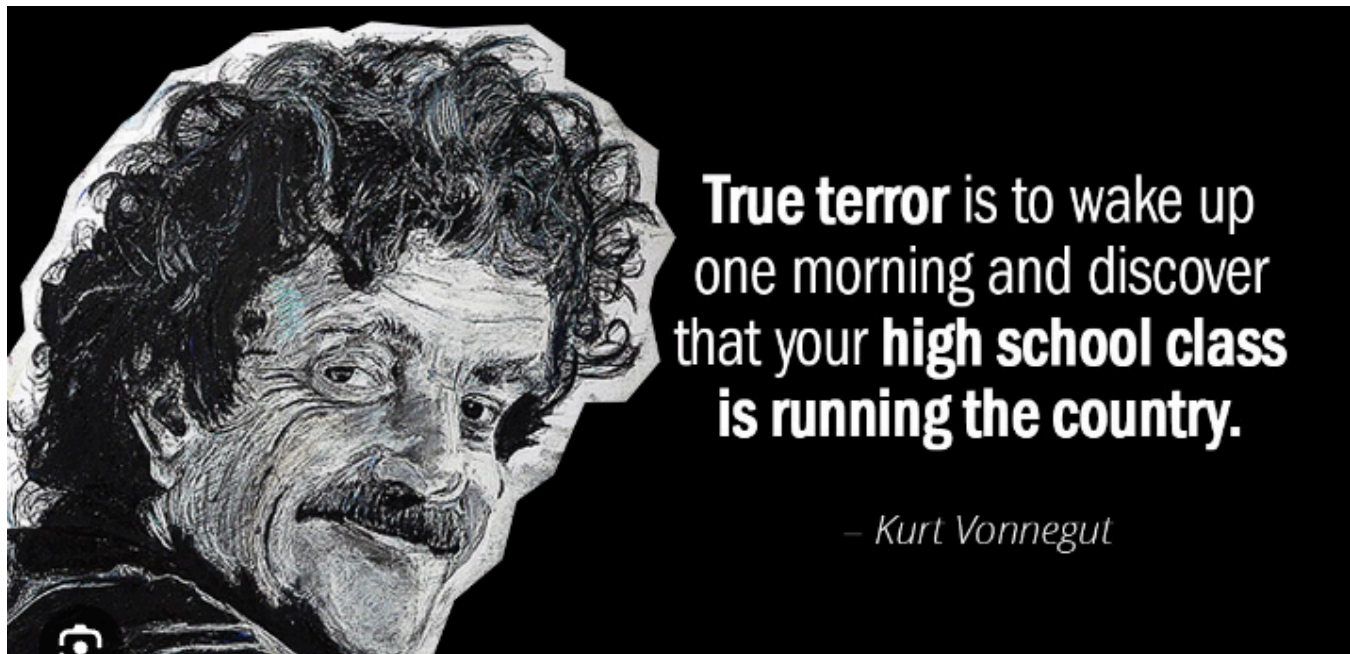
Should those of us who appreciate the First Principle be satisfied with its incorporation into the Value of Equity in the Article II Revisions? I believe the answer is No.

In the first place, I don't think that inherent worth and inherent worthiness are identical. UUA official Charles DuMond—in explicating Equity—tells us that that worthiness is “the quality of being good enough.” But this raises the question “Good enough for what?” DuMond says that in being inherently worthy we are “good enough as we are”, but this doesn't answer the question. By contrast, to say we have *inherent worth* is to say that by our very nature as persons we deserve to be valued: there's no further question “valued for what?” beyond that nature.

In the second place, in the Revisions equity seems to be the basis for the inherent worthiness of every person, but this may get things backwards. As I mentioned earlier, in the Seven Principles the First is arguably the basis (at least in part) for the Second, which includes equity in human relations.

*For more examples, see UU scholar David Cycleback's online article “Good Ideas Can Come from Bad People”. But I'm not willing to grant that Kant was a bad (as opposed to a flawed) person.

Another online Cycleback article of some relevance to my sermon is called “How Unitarian Universalism Became a Church of Shaming, Bullying, and Coercion.” It mentions the First Principle only twice, but makes a mostly implicit case that violations of this principle have become endemic since the UUA was taken over by illiberal leftwing ideologues.



A NEURODIVERSITY PERSPECTIVE

Intellectual Freedoms Support Diversity

by David Cycleback

*“Discovery consists in seeing what everyone else has seen
and thinking what no one else has thought.” – Albert Szent-Gyorgyi*

My work in cognitive and philosophy focuses on brains (human, non-human animal, and artificial) and their relationship to knowledge, beliefs, and behavior. One area I study is neurodiversity in humans. I am also bipolar and autistic and have experienced a lifetime of issues surrounding the relationship between those with brain disorders and society.

Neurodiversity is the natural diversity of human brain function. It is comparable to biodiversity where diversity of skin and hair colors, body types, and physical abilities is natural. Just as one should expect and appreciate diversity in biology, one should expect and appreciate diversity in brain function. Likely no two brains function exactly alike. Even within the parameters of what is considered normal, there is great diversity.

While neurodiversity is commonly centered on what is pathologized as disorders such as autism, dyslexia, and attention deficit disorder, brain function is influenced by many factors. These include culture, ethnicity, education, innate personality, and personal experiences. In the paper ‘Neurodiversity as a Competitive Advantage,’ business professors Robert Austin and Gary Pisano write, “Everyone is to some extent differently-abled (an expression favored by many neurodiverse people) because we are all born different and raised differently.”

Neurodiversity and multiculturalism are intertwined. Mental illnesses and physical disabilities exist across all demographics, including all races, ages, sexes, and nationalities. Racial and ethnic minorities and people from other cultures often talk about being frustrated in the dominant culture and having to code-switch. This exists for people with disorders, with them often feeling misunderstood and masking their natural behavior and personality to be accepted.

Cultures and societies have traditionally considered their “normal” way of brain function to be the correct way and have dismissed and even persecuted those who think differently. However, all forms of thinking, including ways accepted by society, have trade-offs, situationally good and bad qualities, positive and negative aspects. What is pathologized involves both functional deficits and positive, practical skills.

Many great scientists, artists, and thinkers had mental disorders. While causing them functional and social issues, their different ways of thinking were integral to their work. Ye (Kanye West) is bipolar, as likely were fellow troubled artists Van Gogh and Caravaggio. The great mathematicians and physicists Isaac Newton and Paul Dirac are believed to have been autistic. Jazz pioneer Buddy Bolden was schizophrenic. Albert Einstein and Pablo Picasso were dyslexic. The Nobel Prize-winning mathematician John Nash’s paranoid schizophrenia caused him great trouble, including auditory hallucinations, delusions, and involuntary hospitalizations. However, he said that when the delusions were under control his unique way of thinking contributed to his mathematical discoveries.

There has been growing awareness and appreciation of the diversity of brain function. Just as biodiversity is important to the species, so is neurodiversity. Societies and progress require different thinkers. The Australian sociologist and autism rights activist Judy Singer sees the neurodiversity movement as a social justice movement comparable to the racial, women’s, and LGBT justice movements.

The neurodiversity movement believes it is important to remove the stigma from mental illness and to consider all people as full and important, not defective. One of the problems for people with disorders is a lack of self-esteem due to how people and society consider them.

College of William and Mary neurodiversity scholar John Elder Robison writes: “As an adult with autism, I find the idea of natural variation to be more appealing than the alternative—the suggestion that I am innately bad or broken and in need of repair. I didn’t learn about my own autism until I reached middle age. All those (pre-diagnosis) years I assumed my struggles stemmed from inherent deficiencies. Asserting that I am different—not defective—is a much healthier position to take. Realizing the idea is supported by science is even better.”

Neurodiversity is about viewpoint diversity

A key to supporting people with mental disorders is to know that there is a great diversity of views within every demographic. As with every race, ethnicity, sex, and nationality, people with mental disorders have a wide range of political and social views, philosophies, aesthetic tastes, and personalities. There is no one view on issues of pathology, medical treatments, and the neurodiversity movement. A saying about the autistic is, “If you’ve met one autistic person you’ve met one autistic person.”

While well-intentioned, modern social justice activism that is illiberal, dogmatic, and expects conformity in ideology, politics, and language oppresses the very minorities they are trying to support. Enforced groupthink is the antithesis of supporting diversity and multiculturalism.

Extremist social justice movements that falsely claim they represent the “one, authentic voice” of a demographic and shout down all dissent create misperceptions about minority groups. Not only does such toxic extremism not represent the views of most minorities, but it hurts the cause.

Reject the new victimhood culture and infantilization of minorities

Everyone should be aware of bigotry and listen to previously marginalized voices. We all have much to learn from each other. However, sensitivity and accommodation can swing to the extremes of fanaticism.

Sociology professors Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning research how there is a new victimhood culture on some university campuses and elsewhere. They have written how extremist social justice activists have created a new caste system where those who deem themselves most “marginalized” are morally and socially superior to others. It’s a system that prizes being a victim.

Hallmarks of this victimhood culture are taking offense and expressing outrage at perceived microaggressions, censorship of opposing views and trying to prevent heterodox speakers, demanding safe spaces, politically correct language policing, publicly calling out and shaming perceived heretics, and characterizing people with different views as inherently bad.

Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt says that safe spaces, excessive focus on microaggressions and the idea of being emotionally harmed by words and ideas are not only bad for education but mental health. Cognitive therapy teaches that avoiding fears and anxieties only worsens them. University campuses that are illiberal and intolerant are emotionally and educationally stunting young people, setting them up to fail in life. Anxiety and depression are on the rise among young people. Psychologist and child behavior researcher Valerie Tarico writes, “Given these dynamics, it shouldn’t be surprising that some activists develop habits that can be hard on psychological and relationship health.”

As an attendee at a local Unitarian Universalist congregation, one example of this new infantilization that I have witnessed is the Unitarian Universalist Association’s scrubbing away of perceived harmful words. It removed so-called ableist words such as see, hear, walk, and stand

from its publications. It changed its slogan “Standing on the Side of Love” to “Siding with Love” because it felt the word standing was harmful to the disabled.

This removal of “ableist” language is counter to the views of most people with mental and physical disabilities. Many disabled people find not only condescending but offensive the extreme sanitizing of language. A quadriplegic congregant told me that removing the word standing from “Standing on the Side of Love” was the most idiotic thing he’d heard of, and he would continue to say “standing.” A disability rights lawyer permanently confined to a wheelchair told me that this excessive sanitization of language is promoted by people who mean well but who never asked most people with disabilities what they think and want.

Most people with disabilities understand and use metaphors. Being disabled doesn’t mean being stupid or wanting to be considered as a child.

As is standard procedure these days, the UUA has designed church policy from the viewpoint of a fringe, hypersensitive element within a minority population. Extremists are proxies only for themselves, and you don’t design communities based on the most easily offended.

Some students and young minorities are taught that their subjective feelings are truth. They are taught that it is wrong for their emotional reasoning to be questioned and even to be asked for evidence supporting their opinion.

The idea that anyone’s emotional perception is objective and an unquestionable statement of truth clearly is false, in particular considering that different people of the same demographic have different and often countering views. Not only will other bipolar or autistic people have different views than mine, but I can be wrong on autism and bipolar topics and people without disorders can have important insights in the area.

I am Sephardic and Jews have all sorts of views on any given topic, including Judaism and Israel. To treat my particular opinion or feeling as “unquestionable truth” is dumb, including to Jews. Some Jews will respond to my opinion on a Jewish topic, “Certainly not! I disagree with what David says.”

Columbia University linguist John McWhorter says such infantilization of minorities is dehumanizing and, in the case of racial minorities, racist.

Victimhood culture and infantilization damage communities

Communities where people and their social and moral worth are based on immutable characteristics, and not on their personal character and merit, are what societies should be moving beyond. Caste systems should be relics of the past. Communities that do not allow the expression of a diversity of thought, communities where people are intimidated into silence, are unhealthy and dysfunctional.

This article argues for the respectful open exchange of ideas, and freedom of speech and expression. It argues for the importance of listening to and learning from others’ perspectives and ideas to expand our knowledge and understanding. These are essential for democracy, education, a collective search for truth, and healthy societies, communities, and personal relationships.

Having and maintaining liberal, tolerant communities and institutions that support the respectful exchange of ideas are not passive activities. Illiberalism and censorship don’t always come in the form of edicts or rules from authority. They can come via groupthink and crowd following, peer pressure, and going along to get along. Self-censorship is censorship. They can come from a culture that doesn’t actively foster freedom of expression and dialogue.