



Rev. Paige Getty's Reflection

From Online Worship: "Exploring the 8th Principle"

May 17, 2020

Reflection Part 1: *The 8th Principle: What?*

A number of years ago—it was 2013, I think—I sat through a meeting of Unitarian Universalist clergy here in the DC / Baltimore / Northern Virginia region and listened to a presentation from a member of the 8th principle project.

As I remember it, they told us they were organizing to have an 8th principle added to the seven that are already codified in the covenant of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. They shared their proposed language:

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.

I bristled.

While not a creed or a statement of belief, our seven principles have always been precious—sacred—to me, and this proposal felt like an affront to that sanctity. The wording didn't really fit with the poetry of the other principles. And while this proposed 8th principle expresses an important sentiment, my initial reaction was that our statement of principles didn't seem like the right place to codify it.



I remember grumbling, commiserating with a colleague friend about whether this was such a good idea. But neither of us said anything that day, nor in public discussions that followed. Instead we chose to hold our misgivings, our discomfort, and to stay on the sidelines and watch how the effort would unfold.

And here we are, seven years later, and I am inspired and impressed by the vigilance and stamina of that that small organizing collective, still working steadily to build a movement that will eventually take a strong hold. I think about that popular Margaret Mead quote: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

And I’m glad I kept to myself and watched for a while. Watched, listened to stories, reflected on my own place in those stories. It’s been in these years that I’ve learned a lot about the glasses I was gifted at birth—glasses that have served me so very well, kept me content, and safe ... and, too often, also kept me oblivious to the insecurity and discontent and pain of people I’ve claimed to care for, people who have, for generations, been the targets of oppression and injustice and racism. I’ve listened to their stories, and I understand better than I used to how my life of relative ease and contentment and safety as a cisgender white woman has come at a cost to others.

And I better understand now the context in which those original thoughtful, committed organizers drafted this proposed principle.

These are people who love Unitarian Universalism and who have always been on its margins.

They understand its history of white liberal elitism; its history of being led by those who prioritized not merely reason, but intellectualism and book-learning, over any other ways of knowing and understanding the world;



its history of silencing those who worked to be fully embraced by the religious association, even as they have largely remained relegated to its margins.

These organizers understand all this history and still love Unitarian Universalism—its progressive ideals; its honoring the wisdom of Humanism and Christianity and Paganism and Judaism; its congregations where the prophethood of all—and not just the clergy—is celebrated; its conviction that living well in this earthly life is a priority over whatever may come after; its direct action in confronting Nazism during World War II and racism during the Civil Rights era; its being on the leading edge of gay and lesbian rights in the 1970s.

They also understand that the hallmark of Unitarian Universalism is that it deliberately and enthusiastically is *not static*. It is a religious tradition that grows and changes and evolves. Our identity is characterized not primarily by rituals and old texts, but by the way we agree to be together, continually learning and growing and changing as new information and insight is introduced.

Contrary to my initial reaction seven years ago, keeping the principles unchanged doesn't protect their sanctity. It just keeps them unchanged, and perhaps at risk of becoming irrelevant.

The organizers of the proposed 8th Principle of Unitarian Universalism love their religious association enough to say, we can be even better, even stronger. *We can be even more faithful to and with one another. We can be even more healthy, more spiritually whole. We are worth it.*

They are urging us to acknowledge that we live in a world that is still characterized by oppression and racism ... America's original sin, as some have said. To acknowledge that oppression and racism are preventing us from being the truly Beloved Community that we profess to be or to want to be.



But if we commit ourselves to doing the hard and uncomfortable work of recognizing where oppression and racism live in ourselves ... and if we cultivate real relationship with one another, and especially with those who will speak up in love when we misunderstand or cause harm, holding us accountable to our better selves—"challenging each other to live our values", as UUCC's covenant says ... then we have the hope of real healing and real wholeness, as individuals and as communities.

So, what is the 8th principle, and what is this congregation being asked to do with it? It is a draft statement, developed by a grassroots group of lay leaders who recognize that racism and other oppressions still remain within our congregations as they do in the wider world. They hope that someday it will be on the agenda of the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association for formal acceptance into our covenant of congregations. But it's not there yet ... and that's a long and arduous process. Once that process begins in earnest, there will be lots of wordsmithing and debate. It is likely to take years.

So, what's being asked of UUCC now—with a vote at our annual meeting in June—is less about the letter of this statement and more about its spirit. We're being asked to say that we as a congregation endorse the anti-racist, anti-oppressive sentiment of this principle. We're being asked to say that in the early days of this 8th principle movement, we recognized in ourselves room for growth and improvement in being truly anti-racist and anti-oppressive. We're being asked to fuel the forward momentum of a movement.

The vote on June 7th is not a vote about the wording of a statement. It will be a vote about endorsing a commitment to remaining on a journey toward spiritual wholeness, a journey that demands that we recognize and confront our own shortcomings and then act, together, to make them better.



Reflection Part 2: *The 8th Principle: Why?*

A few minutes ago, I said that we are in the early days and years of this 8th principle movement. Currently, eighteen (18) congregations have endorsed it... and each of them did it in their own way. Some are listing it as #8 anywhere that they print the other 7 principles, some of them have said they've adopted it, some have said endorse. It's still early. And it's 18... you might say *only* 18, since there are more than a thousand Unitarian Universalist congregations in the Association.

We're being invited—especially by members of color in UUCC—to join those 18 and energize this movement.

And I think that in the heightened tensions of our congregation's recent years—and especially the past eleven months—our perspective has grown somewhat skewed, or, at least, we've failed to adjust our perspective to gain fuller understanding of the 8th principle invitation that's being offered.

To a regrettable extent, we've become hyper-focused on wording and semantics—for which there will be time and space to wrestle, along with other congregations. And we've lost touch with the larger purpose—affirming our commitment to being the progressive, justice-seeking, anti-oppressive institution that we already claim to be.

When I am hyper-focused on the moment that I'm in—when I'm experiencing or trying to imagine the short-term consequences of a particular decision, when I'm feeling my feelings and my body's reaction in the moment and getting worked up, agitated, emotional—I try to remember to pause and think about predictable long-term impacts. ... What will history say about the decision we're making? What side of history do I (we) intend to be on? Twenty years from now, will there be a formally adopted 8th Principle of Unitarian Universalism? Will we as Unitarian Universalists have continued to evolve in our understanding of



what it means to be people of faith, to serve a good greater than the comfort of our individual lives?

And if there is, will history show that the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia, Maryland, was attentive to and invested in the realities in which it lived? Did the UU Congregation of Columbia, Maryland, see Latinx transgender women and temporarily homeless individuals and Asian-American salon workers and Black young adults in their parking lot as members of their community, or as other? Did the UU Congregation of Columbia, Maryland, listen to its members who were Black men and Asian-American women and queer teenagers and others on the margins of its congregation—the ones who said, we want to belong here? Did the members of the UU Congregation of Columbia, Maryland—the ones who, in all of its history, had the power—ask, “Who are my people? Who is excluded? And what do I need to do to be sure that all who are committed to our principles of acceptance and growth and justice know that they can belong here?”

We are at a moment in history where we who have been mostly at ease, comfortable, safe in Unitarian Universalism, are being asked to side with those who are not accustomed to feeling those things—not in our congregations, and not elsewhere in their lives.

We're being asked to say, yes, we endorse the spirit of this 8th principle that asks us to be in accountable relationship with one another to dismantle racism and oppression in ourselves and our congregation.

We're not being asked to say that our other priorities are unimportant or even less important. Our efforts to address climate chaos, to provide resources for those who are food insecure, to sing and grieve and pray and play and learn together ... are all still critically important.

We're being asked to affirm that the work of dismantling racism and other oppressions is one of those top priorities.



The stress of this pandemic, the stress of the current federal administration, is making our differences stand out—we're feeling the tensions at UUCC even more intensely than under more typical circumstances. It's making our consideration of annual meeting business even more heated than it might have been.

AND... Those who are oppressed and repressed, who already were at risk before the pandemic hit, they're suffering more than the rest of us. Those who haven't been sure whether there's a place for them truly to belong at UUCC, they're still unsure. The work of the congregation—our care for one another, our business, our learning, our growing—those are happening in new forms, but they have not ceased.

The 8th principle was relevant seven years ago, and seven months ago, and seven days ago.

We, the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia, which is—and has always been—predominantly white, is being asked to say YES, we endorse the spirit of the 8th principle of Unitarian Universalism ... knowing that a vote will not be the end of a conversation, but will be the beginning of that conversation's next chapter.

We are people of faith. People who are invited to bring the lives they live into this community, that we might learn together from those lives we are living. We are all here to be seen for exactly who we are, to be comforted in our grief, to practice what it means to be our best human selves.

And we're being asked to say yes to remaining on the journey toward spiritual wholeness by affirming our commitment to dismantling the racism and oppression that lives within us, that our lives and the lives of all we claim to love, may be fully, truly whole.

Because, as the Rev. Theresa Soto wrote, "All of us need all of us to make it." Amen.