

Challenging Our Tendencies

A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

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From the earliest days of our faith in mid-sixteenth century Transylvania and later in Poland, our faith, was founded on the idea of covenants within a free-thinking church. These are promises, agreements, to hold each other accountable to live our values within the church into the wider world. Rev. Richard Gilbert echoes this. He wrote, “our faith is centered less on doctrine than on the practical application of religious principles into daily life”. Love and tolerance are embodied in our singular, not Trinitarian belief in God. We believe in a non-theist rational understanding of moral conduct, valuing our deeds above creeds. Emerson said, “what you are ...thunders so that I cannot hear what you say”.

A 1981 story in the Chicago Tribune about Mother Theresa and the president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Eugene Pickett is telling. During a visit to Chicago she was asked the question of life’s final meaning. Her answer was, “to become holy, and to go to heaven.” Eugene Pickett’s response to the same question was a significant variation on that theme, “the purpose of life is to become whole, and to create a heaven on earth.” Surely that possibility begins with justice, equity and compassion.

The very name Unitarian Universalist writes Gilbert “suggests a strong ethical component. “Unitarian” implies the unity of all beings, binding us together in one human family. “Universalist” suggests that our concerns are global in nature, that no one is to be excluded.

Our second principle articulates that tradition.” Unitarian Universalists find ultimate meanings in how we live our values. The core of our faith is to be of service starting here at All Faiths and all our congregations.

All our seven principles define what It means to be spiritual and ethical. Gilbert sums it up with these words “in the love of beauty and the spirit of truth, we unite for the celebration of life and the service of humanity.” Not a bad phrase to include in our “elevator talk” that calls us to define our faith in 10 floors or less. We would each do well to remember and repeat our own speech as part of our daily spiritual practice.

Sadly, we sometimes forget our values in the heat of a disagreement, or when annoyed or trying to win a point. If we believe that everyone deserves to be treated fairly, with compassion and respect, why do we fall to criticizing each other or talk behind the back of the person whom we disagree? Why do we neglect to treat the grocery store clerk with respect, or to have compassion for someone with a disability? Do we merely forget to be compassionate or worse are we hypocrites, looking only to win an argument or get allies in a conflict? I think and hope it is the former.

Peter Senge developed the “Ladder of Inference“ (first proposed by Chris Argyris) in the Fifth Discipline Fieldbook to illustrate our critical thinking as individuals. Senge states that every important decision we make usually goes through this cycle:

Taking actions based on my beliefs,
 Adopting beliefs about the world,
 Building conclusions,
 Drawing assumptions based on meaning,
 Adding meanings (culturally and personally),
 Selecting information that you observe, and
 Observing information and experiences.

It also works as a reflective loop; our beliefs influence what we observe. Conclusions based on our own beliefs and assumptions are usually “obvious” to us, but we often jump to them by missing steps and objective facts.

Perhaps, the next time any of us become frustrated or cross with someone, we might remember see the other person with eyes brimming over with compassion. Perhaps, they are dealing with debilitating crises of a physical or emotional nature or just having a bad day. Let us remember that when there are misunderstandings, disagreements, arguments they need to be resolved quickly with patience and compassion, not confrontation, sniping “or whispering down the lane”. As the aphorism reminds us, “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” At times, we all fail to bring our better angels to the table, but if we engage in some reflective self-talk, it might help us to avoid conflict. Better to talk to ourselves than to quarrel or bad-mouth another.

One might think compassion would be the easiest to achieve, but, I think, the more personal the relationship the harder it seems to give in, compromise, be open and trusting of the common humanity we share. Perhaps, “familiarity does breed contempt.” To be respectful and kind when nose to nose and feeling vulnerable and afraid often causes us to back away from our principles and assume an aggressive self-protection stance. And suddenly, we’re in a wrestling match with each opponent aiming for a knock put punch. Have any of us been in that situation?

Have any of us ever let ourselves “freak out” in a public confrontation to show our power or to get people to choose sides, ours, not theirs? Do we need to be right and the other person wrong? If so, I suggest we can all do much better. If peace and justice, equity and compassion does not begin with us, how can we ever hope to make a better safer world? I certainly have failed often enough in my own efforts at treating people fairly with justice, equity and compassion in my heart. As I get older, I find myself getting more cranky and short with people. I am certainly less tolerant of, self-entitled, self-centered people who build themselves up by knocking others down, especially in the political arena and in social institutions. Such as schools and churches.

As UUs we to sometimes forget the needs of the many for selfish purposes. Now, having said that, I realize my characterizing of other as I just did is becoming what I most object to in people who do not honor their covenants with each other. This is to say the least an uncomfortable realization. It’s tough, isn’t it, to face how flawed we all are, how depressingly human we can be. The one good think to come out such self-revelation is that it can shock us into seeing who we are. Staring at the abyss of our own human failing can jolt us back into communion with others. It can be an important teaching moment to re-examine our faith and seven principles. It

can help us to be the kind of people we want to be: justice, equity and compassionate seeking people in all our human relations.

If we can but remember to walk at least a mile in another's shoes, perhaps we can come to see each other as our brothers and sisters. To do so would surely lead to compassion in all our relationships. A daily practice of our seven principles is part of our spiritual journey as Unitarian Universalists. A loving, gentle approach can change our lives. The author Emily Gage wrote, "with a self-aware attitude and engaging in an inner dialogue" we can create a better society. I believe that in my heart in the same way I know this is not something we can do entirely alone. It is something that becomes more and more powerful as we find our voice and join with others in common cause.

Through our seven overlapping principles we can continue to create a framework for peace and love. Our faith calls us live such existential questions of life and relationships. Let us hope we will always be willing to challenge our tendencies, to question whether our moral and ethical conduct is in keeping with our values. The idealism embedded in our second principle are noble, but fraught with many obstacles. either self-made and imposed by others, but if we each model our second principle we can change the world.

Let us then, resolve today to consciously treat each other with respect and dignity, to see each other as precious and human. Let us pass on compassion justice and equity on, and on, and on", as an act of real kindness. From there we can begin to build systems and institutions that best reflect our values. If we can do that, our second principle will become more than just a dream.

May it be so.