

Preparation for G062 – UU Principles 3 and 5

PRINCIPLE 3: ACCEPTANCE OF ONE ANOTHER AND ENCOURAGEMENT TO SPIRITUAL GROWTH IN OUR CONGREGATIONS

PRINCIPLE 5: THE RIGHT OF CONSCIENCE AND THE USE OF THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS WITHIN OUR CONGREGATIONS AND IN SOCIETY AT LARGE

For four consecutive sessions, we will examine the seven Unitarian Universalist principles. This is the third of these sessions. Our approach was taken from an essay by Rev. Frances Manley. A long quote from that essay is included in this preparation. If you would like to read the entire essay, it is included in the book *Essex Conversations*, which is available from the UUA bookstore, and may be available from Circle Books.

Manley writes: “A similar, though less obvious balance exists between the third and the fifth Principles, where acceptance of one another as individuals corresponds to the right of each person to speak and act publicly – that is, in the context of community – according to his or her conscience; and the encouragement to individual spiritual growth corresponds to the affirmation of democratic process as the means by which the community itself can grow toward its greatest potential.”

1. We say that we want everyone to have the right to speak their own truth; at the same time, we want our congregations to be a safe place for everyone. Have there been times when you have seen these two desires come into conflict, when one person speaking his or her truth might make another person feel unsafe? How have you felt about those issues?
2. Unitarian Universalists tend to have very similar views when it comes to politics and social justice. To what extent is our congregation a safe place for those whose political or social justice views might be different? Is it important for us to make the congregation a safe place for dissenting views? To what extent have you felt safe expressing a dissenting view?
3. These principles call for “acceptance of one another.” To what extent does that require that we listen to one another, including to those people with whom we disagree? Do you think there are views that cannot be accepted in a Unitarian Universalist congregation? What does this principle mean when it comes to working with people we don’t like, or whose behavior offends us?
4. The democratic action of congregational meetings can be quite a challenge. How do you feel when a vote has been taken, and you find yourself in the minority? Would you feel safe standing out as a minority of one, or would you abstain from voting? How do you feel towards someone else who stands out as a minority of one? How might keeping these two principles in mind change your attitude or behavior in congregational meetings?
5. How can we best use these principles to inform and empower our lives?

One of the most valuable tools available to us . . . is the Principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association – if we read them in such a way as to reveal and emphasize the “principle behind the Principles.” I propose that we look at the Principles as a single complex statement, rather like a poem. When we do so we find that the whole conveys a coherent meaning greater than the sum of its seven constituent parts, and each principle in turn derives an important layer of meaning from its relationship to the whole.

As I read them the overall structure of the Principles reflects the fact that as human beings we are always in dynamic tension between separateness and connection, between individualism and community, between autonomy and interdependence. The poles of this tension are represented, as has often been noted, by the first and seventh Principles: the inherent worth and dignity of every person at one end, and the interdependent web of all existence at the other. What has not been generally recognized, however, is that as we move from the ends toward the center, paired Principles balance one another, expressing related concepts but reflecting a different point on the continuum from separateness to connection, a different resolution of the tension between the two poles. The second and sixth Principles, for example, both address the issue of justice; but one sees it from the more individualistic perspective of justice, equity and compassion for each person, while the other offers the perspective of community, affirming peace, liberty, and justice for all. A similar, though less obvious balance exists between the third and the fifth Principles, where acceptance of one another as individuals corresponds to the right of each person to speak and act publicly – that is, in the context of community – according to his or her conscience; and the encouragement to individual spiritual growth corresponds to the affirmation of democratic process as the means by which the community itself can grow toward its greatest potential.

In the center of the Principles, at the point where individualism and interdependence meet, is the “free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” Thus, by their very structure the Principles not only affirm the search for meaning as central to the human enterprise, but also suggest that the very meaning we search for, the meaning of human existence itself, is to be found somehow in the fact that we are at once separate individuals of worth and dignity and interdependent parts of an indivisible whole. Moreover, that same structure also suggests that a “free and responsible” search for truth and meaning does not mean a purely individual search because none of us is a purely individual being. Rather, it is inherently something we carry out both in the privacy of our own souls and in community with others.