

Preparation for G063 – UU Principle 4

PRINCIPLE 4: A FREE AND RESPONSIBLE SEARCH FOR TRUTH AND MEANING

For four consecutive sessions, we have been examining the seven Unitarian Universalist principles. This is the final one 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.

In this final session, we examine the hinge that holds all of these Principles together. Manley writes: “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.”

Perhaps the most important word in this principle is “responsible.” Without it, we would be free to believe whatever we want to believe. Instead, we are required to believe what a free and responsible search for truth and meaning leads us to believe. This is a much higher standard to attain.

As you think about your own lifelong search for truth and meaning, we invite you to contemplate some of the following questions:

1. What beliefs from your past have you given up? Were they damaging beliefs, or comforting beliefs? Were they easy to give up or hard to give up? What led you to give up those beliefs?
2. Can you name any beliefs you wish you had, but cannot bring yourself to? Why would you like to believe them? What prevents you?
3. Are there beliefs that others – especially other Unitarian Universalists– believe that you would like to embrace? Are there beliefs held by others – especially other Unitarian Universalists –that you think are damaging or foolish? Why? How does this affect you? How can you listen to them speak their truths, and hear what you might learn, if you believe they are damaging or foolish?
4. The search for truth and meaning may be carried out in any number of ways, including scientific inquiry, an academic study of the words of prophetic women and men, a study of scriptures, discussion with others, experiences with nature, experiences in worship, meditation or other ways of seeking transcendent experiences. These sources for our inspiration are listed in the “other” part of our Principles and Purposes, and illustrated on the plaques in the front of our sanctuary. Which of these avenues have you included in your own search? Are their avenues for this search that you would like to pursue, but have not? If there are, what is holding you back?
5. Thinking over the past three sessions, what role have the Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes played in your own search for truth and meaning?
6. Having spent several weeks looking at the dynamic tension between individuation and interdependence, have you had any new insights into the role that the Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes play in your own life?
7. Finally, one last time, 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 emphasizes 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.