"Our Fourth Principle:
A free and responsible search for truth and meaning"

Rev. Lyn Oglesby, Ph.D. March 22, 2015

"As responsible religious seekers, we recognize that we are privileged to be free, to have resources to pursue life beyond mere survival, to continually search for truth and meaning, to exist beyond bonds of dogma and oppression, and to wrestle freely with truth and meaning as they evolve.

"This privilege calls us not to be isolated and self-centered, believing that our single perspective trumps all others, but rather to be humble, to be open to the great mysteries of truth and meaning that life offers. And those mysteries may speak to us through our own intuition and experience—but also through tradition, community, conflict, nature, and relationships.

"As a faith tradition, Unitarian Universalism makes sacred the right and responsibility to engage in this free and responsible quest as an act of religious devotion. Institutionally, we have left open the questions of what truth and meaning are, acknowledging that mindful people will, in every age, discover new insights."[1]

"We have left open the questions of what truth and meaning are, acknowledging that mindful people will, in every age, discover new insights." Can you imagine a religious denomination that offers a series of workshops entitled, "Building Your Own Theology?" Can you imagine such a curriculum in the Catholic Church, the Jewish faith, Protestant denominations, Islam, Hinduism, of Buddhism? Here, we

deliberately encourage everyone to formulate a personal theology that reflects the moral concepts and values and worldviews that we build ourselves. This doesn't mean that we start from scratch or throw the baby out with the bathwater. It means that we study, interpret, reformulate, design, or develop ways of thinking and being in the world that are genuinely our own.

We are hoping to offer a series on "Building Your Own Theology" sometime soon. This is a series of exploratory discussions developed by the Rev. Richard Gilbert, Minister Emeritus of our church in Rochester, New York. If you are interested in participating, and learning more about the way you and others feel about ways of being, living, and dong, please contact me. And watch for information in the weekly newsletter.

Every time I stop to think about it, I pinch myself. A formal religious faith that doesn't require us to believe, to adhere to any doctrine or dogma, or to take a vow of acceptance of a particular theology. A faith tradition that is so confident in our ability to seek, learn, discern, make choices and decisions, that encourages us to find our own way. To develop our own ideas of truth and the meaning of life and the meaning of existence. To develop our own interpretation of how to live with a sense of purpose, to develop morals and ethics and to continue to learn and change throughout a lifetime? Not to be told what to do. Not to be told what to read. Not to be told what to believe. Not to be told how to live. But to encourage each of us to search for truth independently, or in the company of others.

Did you know that we have a Religious Education program going on right now, encouraging a group of young people to develop their own "credo" or belief system? It's called "Coming of Age." And each young person in that group has an adult mentor in this congregation to discuss issues, questions, and concerns with. They are not required to memorize scripture or at a young age commit to a certain belief. They are encouraged to think about, to talk about, to explore ways of being, ways of living, and to discuss their ideas with others.

Does this freedom mean that it doesn't matter what we believe? That anything goes? **Certainly not!** Recall that the Principle is "a free and **responsible** search for truth and meaning". Free and **responsible.**

One of my favorite readings in the back of our hymnal is Number 657, by Sophia Lyons Fahs, our great religious educator. It is entitled, "It Matters What We Believe."

Some beliefs are like walled gardens. They encourage exclusiveness, and the feeling of being especially privileged.

__Other beliefs are expansive and lead the way into wider and deeper sympathies.

Some beliefs are like shadows, clouding children's days with fears of unknown calamities.

__Other beliefs are like sunshine, blessing children with the warmth of happiness.

Some beliefs are divisive, separating the saved from the unsaved, friends from enemies.

__Other beliefs are bonds in a world community, where sincere differences beautify the pattern.

Some beliefs are like blinders, shutting off the power to choose one's own direction.

__Other beliefs are like gateways opening wide vistas for exploration.

Some beliefs weaken a person's selfhood. They blight the growth of resourcefulness.

__Other beliefs nurture self-confidence and enrich the feeling of personal worth.

Some beliefs are rigid, like the body of death, impotent in a changing world.

__Other beliefs are pliable, like the young sapling, ever growing with the upward thrust of life.[2]

Freedom from dogma and creed may sound simple, easy. But not so. It is never finished. The path is long. The path is fascinating. The path has twists and turns, changes in direction, uphill, downhill, through forests of confusion, barrages of ideas, infinite discoveries, and then rediscoveries and new discoveries. It is not easy. But it certainly is interesting, challenging, and most all, it's FUN! Anyone who likes to learn, who enjoys discovery, anyone who is interested in the meaning of life, the purpose of life, great ideas and great issues, clarifying values, and living a good life can get caught up in this.

Never forget for a moment that this principle, this freedom to search for truth and meaning, has not come cheaply. Read the newspapers, listen to the news, turn on the television. People are having their heads chopped off almost every day, ceremoniously, because of their beliefs. Believers of the same faith, Islam, invade mosques, murder, throw bombs, and destroy believers of different sects of Islam: Shi'a, Sunni, Zaydi, on a daily basis. Catholics and Protestants fought in Ireland for over 300 years. Six million Jews were murdered in the 1930s. Persecution of Jews continues to this day, all over the world. Shame, shame, shame! Christians of all varieties are in danger throughout the Muslim world. Buddhists and Tamils fought for years in Sri Lanka. China has been trying to destroy Tibetan Buddhism since the early 1950s.

In 1568, King John Sigismund of eastern Hungary, also known as Transylvania, issued the Edict of Torda, the first broad decree of religious freedom in the modern history of Europe.

His majesty, our Lord, in what manner he – together with his realm – legislated in the matter of religion at the previous Diets, in the same matter now, in this Diet, reaffirms that in every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well. If not, no one shall compel them for their souls would not be satisfied, but they shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teaching they approve. Therefore none of the superintendents or others shall abuse the preachers, no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone, according to the previous statutes, and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching. For faith is the gift of God and this comes from hearing, which hearing is by the word of God. [3]

King John Sigismund supported the establishment of the Unitarian Church of Transylvania. John encouraged respect for and open dialogue between all religious viewpoints; he sponsored a public debate between Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, and Unitarians. Other religious groups, including Jews, Orthodox Christians, and Muslims, were granted tolerance, but not legal guarantees of freedom.

The struggle to be able to speak truth to power and to discuss the existential meaning of life, freely and openly, goes on all around us. And these discussions can be lightning rods. I remember when I was a young person, my parents cautioned me against discussing politics or religion in social groups. Needless to

say, they lost that one! After all, what more important topics to discuss than politics and religion? Football, baseball and March Madness are seasonal exceptions, of course.

No other faith except Buddhism, that I know of, so intentionally seeks knowledge and encourages discussion and exchange of ideas as much as Unitarian Universalism. The worthiness of ideas centers our faith, our worship, our communities, and our social justice work. It matters what we believe, and it matters what we DO, based on what we believe. It is important to keep the conversation going in our own minds, with ourselves and with others. We do this by reading from a variety of sources, by mindful meditation, by writing, by studying, and by acting on what we learn and choose from our search for truth and meaning.

What a glorious journey we are on!

(And the minister sings):

Though the path be hard and long,
still we strive in expectation;
join we now their ageless song,
one with them in aspiration.
One in name, in honor one,
guard we well the crown they won;
what they dreamed be ours to do,
hope their hopes, and seal them true.[4]

In the name of all that is sacred and holy, Amen

[1] http://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles/4th. Rev. Paige Getty, UU Congregation of Columbia, Maryland.

[2] Fahs, Sophia Lyons. It Matters What We Believe. Singing the Living Tradition, #657. Beacon Press, Boston. Copyright, 1993. The Unitarian Universalist Association

[3] Unitarian Universalist Partner Church Council. UUA.org.

[4] Rank by Rank, Again We Stand. Singing the Living Tradition, #358. Beacon Press, Boston. Copyright, 1993. The Unitarian Universalist Association