

“Principles to Live By” ©
Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society, Madison, CT
The Rev. Jeanne Lloyd
April 26, 2020

As Unitarian Universalists we revere: (1) the teachings of many great religious and philosophical leaders, (2) the wisdom of science, (3) each person’s own spiritual journey, (4) and the value of being in a covenantal community. And, so that means that what you will hear from this pulpit covers a wide range of theologies, philosophies, and moral conditions.

PAUSE

Today we begin a 7-part worship series on our Unitarian Universalist Principles, and as such I am borrowing broadly from the work of Kenneth Collier and his book, *Our Seven Principles in Story and Verse*.¹

Ours is a free church, meaning that though we ground ourselves in the world’s great religions, we do not adhere to one dogma that tells people who or what G*d,² is or what rules to follow in order to find an afterlife. Instead, we encourage each person’s individual search for meaning and growth, within a covenantal community that aspires to be both a safe space and a place from which we can rise together to address the ills of the world.

You sang a paraphrased version of our 7 principles in the children’s song a few minutes ago, so I won’t say them again now. Our principles were crafted by many people, after two faiths, Unitarianism and Universalism, merged in 1961. Our principles are not a creed, or a dogma, or a confession of faith. They are simply a statement of ideals commonly held by us, even though we each have varying degrees of success in fulfilling them.³ No one is forced to believe these principles, and indeed, that freedom to choose, is at the root of who we are as a religion. We do not claim to have the answers that will save you from bad times, we merely offer you the space, with others, to discern what it is that brings meaning and joy to your life?

¹ Collier, Kenneth W. **Our Seven Principles in Story and Verse, A Collection for Children and Adults** (Boston: Skinner Books) 1997.

² Rev. Lloyd does not spell out the word, “G*d,” because the term is loaded with many misconceptions and preconceptions. That which is the spirit of life and community, the spirit of love and death, the spirit of humanity, cannot be relegated to one three letter word. Rev. Lloyd invites others to reconsider the meanings of this word, and, to contemplate whether it is a noun or verb. Is G*d Love? The reader is invited to expand their vision and understanding . . .

³ Collier, Kenneth W. **Our Seven Principles in Story and Verse, A Collection for Children and Adults** (Boston: Skinner Books) 1997, 12-13.

But, even there, we do not say that one way will always be your “right way”. Instead we hold fast to the idea that each of us grows over time, and the understanding that what sustains best when we were 20 might not be that which sustains us when we are 60 . . . and that’s OK. Here, when your faith changes, you do not have to leave this church! We encourage your evolution of faith, knowing that as you evolve in this community, you will know instinctively which spiritual practices resonate for you.

This concept of growth is what Collier identifies as the Greek concept of Telos – it is “that which draws something forward, that which gives a process its impetus and direction. It is what allows development to happen.”⁴ (emphasis added) Our seven principles are a “kind of moral and spiritual telos, it is what we strive for, what we aim at, what gives us a sense of our unfolding as spiritual beings.”⁵

And, so I turn to our first Principle, namely “*that we covenant to affirm and promote: the inherent worth and dignity of every person.*” This is a high bar to aspire to, and it is our first principle . . . it is not a footnote. It is right there in your face, impossible to avoid. Most often we name it affirmatively in defense of our individual right to be counted as a worthy person, or in defense of other people whose rights are denied and who are marginalized by abusive powers.

All that is good, or can be.

But, let me cut to the chase. We have a much harder time affirming and promoting this principle, (the inherent worth and dignity of every person) when it is about people we dislike. The reasons we dislike them may be numerous, but to me, it comes down to one of three character traits: incompetence, cruelty, or dishonesty. There may be more reasons (and I invite you to tell me), but those are the three things with which I have considerable trouble. And, for me they all lead to one major character flaw: untrustworthiness.

The problem is that when we presume to apply these labels to a person, or worse, a people, we begin to threaten the power and meaning of Telos, we threaten the energy that calls humanity to grow and change for the better over time. We threaten it for “the other,” and, we threaten it for ourselves.

PAUSE

⁴ Collier, Kenneth W. **Our Seven Principles in Story and Verse, A Collection for Children and Adults** (Boston: Skinner Books) 1997, 14.

⁵ Collier, Kenneth W. **Our Seven Principles in Story and Verse, A Collection for Children and Adults** (Boston: Skinner Books) 1997, 15.

It was hatred and the lack of respect for the worth and dignity of another that undermined the relationship between the Samaritans and the Jews in the time of Jesus. As the story goes,

“[A] lawyer asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” [And], Jesus told . . . a [story of a] man going . . . from Jerusalem to Jericho. Robbers attacked him, took his possessions and clothes, beat him, and left him half dead. A priest came down the road, saw the injured man, and passed by him on the other side. A Levite passing by did the same. A Samaritan . . . saw the hurt man and had compassion [for] him. He poured oil and wine on his wounds, bound them up, [and] then put the man on his donkey. The Samaritan took him to an inn and cared for him. The next morning, [he] gave two denarii to the innkeeper for the man's care and promised to repay him on his way back for any other expenses. [At the end of the story,] Jesus asked the lawyer ‘Which of the three men had been a neighbor[?].’ The lawyer answered, ‘that the man who showed mercy was a neighbor’. Then Jesus told him, ‘[Go] and do likewise.’”⁶

As Dr. Amy-Jill Levine states, “The parable offers . . . a vision of life rather than death . . . It insists that (1) enemies can prove to be neighbors, that (2) compassion has no boundaries, and that (3) judging people on the basis of their religion or ethnicity [or politics (added by Rev. Jeanne)] will leave us dying in a ditch.”⁷

For the robbers, the priest and the Levites, the labels, the name-calling and the prejudices of their injured hearts, not only abandoned the Samaritan to death; these consuming attitudes sacrificed their own unfolding as spiritual beings. They were unable to see the Samaritan with fresh and compassionate eyes, unable to strive toward a higher calling of mercy.

You may ask then, but how do I affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person, when a particular person or people are incompetent, cruel or dishonest? What do I do when someone is untrustworthy? Let me tell you what we must first try not to do.

1. We must try not to make broad generalizations about a whole class of people based on our experiences of a few. We must try to keep an open mind toward every person.
2. Secondly, when possible we need to look for the person behind the façade, to genuinely look for the inherent worth of the spirit within that person. That

⁶ <https://www.learnreligions.com/the-good-samaritan-bible-story-summary-700062> April 25, 2020

⁷ <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/archaeology-today/archaeologists-biblical-scholars-works/understanding-the-good-samaritan-parable/> April 25, 2020

spirit, no matter how deeply buried, was, at birth, “inherently valuable and dignified”⁸ no matter what became of their life. It may be hard to uncover but their Spirit of Life has no less value than our own.

I know that’s hard to hear, but no one ever said ours is an easy faith.

3. Finally, you may ask of me, but what about the cruelest and most incompetent of all people? What about the tyrants of this world who mercilessly oppress others?

And, this is my answer.

Affirming that a tyrant has inherent worth and dignity is a tall order. I admit it.

But, I am not talking philosophically here, I’m talking real life, about real people. We have all lived this predicament: wanting to find the best in someone, but not finding it.

First, I encourage you to acknowledge that the person was born with value and dignity, and that as a human being, their being still has worth. But, then I suggest you distinguish their behavior . . . from their worth. If their behavior is incompetent, cruel, dishonest, untrustworthy; you can acknowledge their inherent worth as a human being, but then do everything you can to undermine and prevent their execution of continued incompetence, cruelty or dishonesty.

There is nothing in our first principle that says we must give free reign to tyrants. And, if we *were* to do so, it would undermine our other principles of justice, democracy and interdependence. What we are asked to do is two-fold: affirm the human spirit within, *while at the same time* preventing their capacity to hurt others.

Holding both strategies in our being is hard but allows for the possibility of growth in the other person, and, perhaps more importantly, affords us the opportunity for our own spiritual growth. It frees us from the bondage of casting aside whole groups of people due to our own prejudice, and, gives us the opportunity to grow spiritually by our relationships with people who are different from ourselves. In so doing, we incarnate the power and meaning of Telos, growing our spirit as we do.⁹

So may it be.

⁸ Collier, Kenneth W. **Our Seven Principles in Story and Verse, A Collection for Children and Adults** (Boston: Skinner Books) 1997, 16.

⁹ Collier, Kenneth W. **Our Seven Principles in Story and Verse, A Collection for Children and Adults** (Boston: Skinner Books) 1997, 14.