

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society

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Online Worship Service
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The Fifth Principle, Conscience & Democracy

Today we continue with our 5th in a 7-part worship series on our Unitarian Universalist Principles. We will finish exploring our 6th & 7th principles in August & September. Our 5th principle is: the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large. Some of my comments today are adapted from the work of Kenneth Collier.¹

If you take a casual glance at our principles in general, you might wonder how it is that this emphasis on our “right of conscience” and on democratic decision-making are part our religious principles? To some they might not seem very religious. They sound more secular, don’t they? Or, governmental? They might seem out of place as a founding principle of a religious tradition and more like something grounded in the founding of this country with its emphasis on individual and representative rights.

But, they are, indeed appropriately placed as religious principles for this particular faith.

Let’s start first with the idea of the “conscience”. From a scientific point of view, I admit that we can’t “see” or measure the conscience as we can the brain or the heart. But, I think many of us have a strong sense that for most of us, it does indeed exist, just as we know that love exists.

Let me offer you a story from the Bible, it speaks to the “still, small voice” within each of us. It is the story of the Hebrew prophet, Elijah, of the 9th century BCE. Along with Moses, Elijah worked to save the religion of Yahweh from being corrupted by the . . . worshippers of Baal.²

“When [the king] decreed that Elijah should be put to death, [Elijah] fled to the mountains to escape. There in a cave he prayed to God, saying that he had had enough and wanted God to take his life. An angel told Elijah to come to the mouth of the cave so that he might stand before God. Elijah did so, and there came an enormous wind, so strong that it uprooted trees and blew the rocks about, but God was not in the wind. And the wind was followed by an earthquake that opened the earth and threw down the hills. But, God was not in the earthquake. And the earthquake was followed by the fire that fell from the heavens and burned what the wind and earthquake had not destroyed. But God was not in the fire – because God is not destructive . . . All of this destructive force was followed by a still, small voice **that** Elijah heard within his soul, and God was in the still, small voice. The voice told him to take heart and to go back the way he had come.”³

PAUSE

[According to Collier,] “this is the first time in the literature of the people of ancient Israel that God is found within the heart, instead of externally. [Previously,] . . . God [would speak] from the top of a

¹ Kenneth Collier. **Our Seven Principles in Story and Verse**, (Boston: Skinner House, 1997).

² Encyclopedia Britannica, **Elijah: Biography, Story and Facts**, Brittanica.com, June 13, 2020

³ Kenneth Collier. **Our Seven Principles in Story and Verse**, (Boston: Skinner House, 1997).

mountain, or from heaven, speaking as something different from us. Here for the first time God speaks to the prophet from within his own heart, as the most intimate part of himself. It is the voice of conscience.”⁴ Collier says, “Conscience is not the voice of conventional morality. It is the voice that pulls us deeper and more directly into the worth of all. And so, if you speak the mythic language of theism, it is the voice of the immanent God speaking within your soul. If you speak the mythic language of humanism, it is the voice of the Profound Human Spirit as it lives within you.”⁵

For the Taoists, it is the Te (as in the Tao Te Ching), the movement of the unnamable, and gives us our individual strength and power. Plato called it areté, the wisdom or virtue of a soul that makes you unique and precious. Buddhists would call it the Buddha-nature that [allows] every person – and even every sentient being – [the capacity] to achieve enlightenment. To the Hindu it is the image of that special step in Shiva’s dance that brings you into existence and allows you to be.⁶

Collier says, “It is that which impels us to the Good, that which ennobles and elevates and frees and heals. It is that which must be stifled and ignored when we do injury and harm and bring [about brokenness]. Conscience is central in every tradition.” “[Many] Unitarian Universalists think of [conscience] as the manifestation of our inherent worth and dignity. Every tradition calls on its adherents to make [the] conscience visible, real and manifest in their living. [Collier concludes], this is the call of conscience, and there could be no religion without it.”⁷

PAUSE

You begin to get a sense of why our conscience is so vitally important, not only to our spirit but also to each person’s voice and our collective spirit. With a conscience, you are able to act and to speak for the moral good. You are able to witness to that which is unjust. You are able to practice kindness and compassion, because your still, small voice, within, that spark of the divine, draws forth from within us an empathy for our neighbor, our communities, other people, and the world.

It is the conscience, from which restorative justice compels us to seek reconciliation, (rather than retributive justice that seeks punishment and revenge.)

PAUSE

The other part of our 5th principle is the practice of democracy. I believe that usually, when we are asked to describe democracy, we tend to simply say that it is “majority rule.” But, actually, democracy is grounded in the concept of “conscience” and for that reason, describing it as “majority rule” misses the point. We all know, perhaps as we have never known before, that “majority rule” can take us down roads that leave others behind in catastrophic ways.

You see, what democracy really is, is a spirit, that by its process, seeks to embody the conscience, the voices of the people, the “still, small voice within” each of us, such that, we may collectively seek

⁴ Kenneth Collier. **Our Seven Principles in Story and Verse**, (Boston: Skinner House, 1997).

⁵ Kenneth Collier. **Our Seven Principles in Story and Verse**, (Boston: Skinner House, 1997).

⁶ Kenneth Collier. **Our Seven Principles in Story and Verse**, (Boston: Skinner House, 1997).

⁷ Kenneth Collier. **Our Seven Principles in Story and Verse**, (Boston: Skinner House, 1997), 73-76

by the votes we cast from our conscience, to bring about health, healing, compassion, justice, and good to humanity.

The spirit of democracy lives fully only when each of us, from our conscience, is able to freely assert our own voice by our own vote. Collier says, “[Unitarian Universalists] believe in the [spirit of democracy] because [our conscience tells us] that privilege, inequality, and oppressive hierarchy are immoral, irreligious, and, if you will, sinful. It is hypocritical [he says] to uphold the inherent worth and dignity of all and the right of conscience while supporting privilege and the suppression of any minority, whether racial, sexual, or [otherwise].”⁸

PAUSE

Ah, but, here’s the problem. Though we say that ours is a democracy . . . from the beginning of this country, democracy’s spirit has been manacled and shackled. For you see, in order for *the spirit of democracy* to truly live, to truly thrive, its Spirit requires the voice and vote of the people, all of the people.

But, that’s not what really happened, is it? That is the flaw we have been paying for, ever since our country’s founding. For in the beginning, who was best able to exert, their vote and political influence, their “still, small voice,” . . . their conscience?

Who could vote?

It was the white men who owned property, wasn’t it?

It was not men without property,
not those who were property,
not people of color, not the women, not immigrants,
not those who could not read,
not those who didn’t have ‘legal’ identification,
not those ostracized,
not those who were and are among the “have nots.”

The “haves” had every right to express their conscience or sometimes just their will, by casting their vote. The “have nots” usually didn’t.

And, that’s the problem, isn’t it?

⁸ Kenneth Collier. **Our Seven Principles in Story and Verse**, (Boston: Skinner House, 1997), 76.

Democracy cannot be the expression of the will of only some of the people. It must be the expression of all of the people who seek for themselves . . . life, liberty and happiness. Our spirit of democracy is gravely wounded when only some are permitted to cast their vote of conscience and others are not.

PAUSE

These times reveal the wounded spirit of democracy, too long denied to the many who thought that they too had inherent worth and dignity; that they too deserved to act on their conscience to create a life worth living for themselves and their own.

Whether you are gay, transgender, black, brown, yellow, or some other color; whether you are a person with different abilities or a person of the “lesser” sex; whether you are an elder or a youth; a parent or a child; no matter how you identify yourself, *the cry of the people for our spirit of democracy* is always the same.

That cry, that assertion, that declaration is, “We are worthy, we have a conscience, we have a voice, we have a right the help fix the tragically flawed systems in which we live. We demand the freedom to be who we are exactly as we are!”

That’s what our founders of this country wanted for themselves. That’s what they provided for themselves. And, that is what all others want and need to have, namely the opportunity to express and have others hear and respond to their own “still, small voice within.”

May it be so.