

THE THIRD PRINCIPLE: Acceptance of One Another and Encouragement to Spiritual Growth

A Sermon Delivered at Wildflower Church, July 29, 2007

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“It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.”

-- Dumbledore in Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets

Many of you know I've preached fairly often here at Wildflower. I love being with you, and I hope you won't forget about me for some of those Sundays when your new minister will not be in the pulpit.

Every time I've preached here in the past, I've gotten to choose what my sermon topic would be. It has always been something I just wanted to preach on, some sermon that had been banging around inside my head trying to desperately to get out. I've preached to you about Don Miguel Ruiz's Four Agreements and Thomas Jefferson's Bible and Stages of Faith Development and “You Might Be a UU If...” And together we celebrated a Yom Kippur/Rosh Hashanah ritual and created a “Festivals of Light” service last December.

But for this one - this sermon, this Sunday - for the first time in my young preaching life, you assigned me a topic! “We'd like you to do a sermon on one of the first six of the Seven Principles”, Allen Fisher e-mailed me. “You can pick which one,” he wrote.

“Well, sure,” I wrote back to him. And, “that will be good for me”, I said to myself. Impose a little discipline on me, like a real minister has. After all, when I take my preaching class in seminary, I'll have to preach from the Revised Common Lectionary, using the specific Biblical texts assigned to a particular day. So this gentle assignment will be good practice. And, I get to pick whatever Principle I want, so how hard can it be? Let me tell you it was very hard!

But, I was pretty confident when I e-mailed Allen back that I'd love to accept the assignment. I looked down the list of the Principles, to pick which one to speak to you about. And the word “spiritual” in the Third Principle caught my eye.

“We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.”

Well, I am all about spirituality now that I am in seminary! I had to take a class all last year called “Spiritual Formation” - and it was very personally meaningful to me. So, surely, I thought, I should have something to say about this Principle, the only one that has the word “spiritual” in it. And so a couple of weeks ago, with this Sunday approaching, I sat down to write a sermon on the topic.

“Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.” “Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.” “Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations...”

I read the Principle over and over and over again. “What on earth does that mean?” I asked myself.

I realized that when I had rather glibly recited the Principles in the past and said those words “acceptance of one another”, I had automatically and immediately thought of what we typically call “diversity”, the kind of diversity that means acceptance of people of different races, different socio-economic classes, different abilities, different sexual preferences - the accepting and open that attitudes Unitarian Universalism does affirm and promote, and which flow directly from the first cornerstone Principle of our faith, respect for “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.”

But if that kind of “acceptance of one another” is what our First Principle is talking about, why is this idea repeated in the Third Principle? What more or what different does the phrase mean there? I began to ask myself.

As I looked more closely, I noticed that in the Third Principle “acceptance of one another” is directly connected - by the little word “and” - to “encouragement of spiritual growth in our congregations”, and so it began to dawn on me that perhaps the acceptance of which our Third Principle speaks must be directly related to spiritual growth in some way.

Maybe it means that we should affirm and promote the acceptance of different theologies within our congregations? That’s the first thing I thought of. Well, yes, I think it does.

Have we covenanted to create a place - a congregation - a church - a faith - where those with Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, pagan, humanist and other theologies will all feel comfortable? Where theists, agnostics and atheists can all sit side-by-side in the pews and be certain that their views are heard, spoken and respected? Yes, I think we have.

But, as I began to think about it a little more deeply, it occurred to me that perhaps this practice of looking at the theological diversity represented within Unitarian Universalism, as we so often do, may not be the only or even the most appropriate lens through which to examine our Third Principle. So, I began to do some research, looking for some help in trying to understand what more “acceptance of one another” might mean in the context of encouraging spiritual growth in our congregations.

I found a sermon that was actually a part of the materials we received last summer at our District’s leadership school, the Dwight Brown Leadership Experience. The sermon was originally delivered at Pathways Church in Southlake, Texas, on May 21, 2006, by the Rev. Anthony David, who led the exploration of UU worship at DBLE this summer, in

which he spoke about four different spiritual styles as described by the ancient Hindu system of the four yogas. Anthony says in his sermon that here the word “yoga” does not refer to the practice of assuming various physical poses that we usually mean when we say we “do yoga” every morning, or we are taking a yoga class at Nautilus Fitness or the Y or some place like that.

These yogas are, instead, he says, “spiritual workouts”, and they describe four distinct spirituality preferences that people can have. Also last summer, I attended a workshop at SWUUSI, our UU District’s family camp that was held up at Lake Murray, Oklahoma this year, and learned about four Spiritual Preferences based on Myers-Briggs personality types, which are amazingly similar to what the ancient Hindus came up with without the benefit of a modern psychological testing instrument, and I could use Myers-Briggs typology in telling you about them. But today, I am going to stick with the terminology of the Hindu yogas.

Now, I must make it perfectly clear that these different spiritual types, these yogas, are not the same thing as different theologies. People with theologies that are very different might still have the same kind of preferred spiritual style, or yoga. You probably have many more than four different theologies represented here at Wildflower Church; I am also quite confident that you have all of four of these spiritual yogas represented in this Unitarian Universalist congregation. I know they are present in my own small congregation. So, what are they? These four Hindu yogas.

The first yoga is the Yoga of the Rational Mind. The person who prefers this kind of spirituality likes intellectual discourse, likes posing questions, likes debating ideas, likes gaining new knowledge. He or she looks for wisdom in the teachings of science, of philosophy, of literature, and/or the arts. The theology that jumps immediately to mind as being consistent with this yoga is humanism or agnosticism.

But Christians or Buddhists or Hindus or anybody else can also be a Rational Mind yogi. Scripture, and tradition, as well as science, can be approached this way. Thomas Jefferson and many other early Unitarians were most comfortable using their reason and conscience to make sense of scripture and their religious beliefs. The spiritual discipline of the yogi of the Rational Mind is scholarship and study and reasoning.

The second Hindu yoga is the Yoga of the Transcending Mind. People who prefer this spiritual style are impatient with words, with the theoretical, with the abstract. They don’t want to talk about their spiritual ideas; they want to be them. They might even feel that “head-knowledge distorts rather than clarifies,” as Anthony David says. These people may engage regularly in a spiritual practice like meditation or centering prayer. They may use incense or chanting or certain kinds of music to help enhance their spiritual experiences. Their spiritual practice may include before a candle flame or the statue of a saint or the image of a goddess -- or a river or a lake or a sunset. The spirituality of the yogi of the Transcending Mind is body-centered, connected to the senses.

The third Hindu yoga is the Yoga of Service. People who prefer this mode may be impatient with both Rational Mind and the Transcending Mind yogis. Both talk and study, and meditating and praying seem like a waste of time to them, when they could be out doing something. One of the Hindu scriptures says, "He who does the task dictated by duty... he is a yogi." For Service yogis, their central spiritual discipline is work, done with the right intention.

The last of the four Hindu yogas is the Yoga of Love. If this kind of spirituality resonates with you, devotion is your spiritual discipline. This may manifest itself in caring for the people around you, in helping to foster right relations between people, and peace within yourself and between others. You will have an image of the Divine that you want to fall in love with. That image may be Jesus or St. Francis or the goddess or Krishna or the Buddha. But you don't have to worship or even follow any of those teachers to practice the Yoga of Love. If you don't believe in a personified god, you will carry in your heart an image of humanity, of all the peoples of the world or perhaps, especially, of those real people you are close whose well-being you desire. To practice the Yoga of Love, you must certainly study and learn, you may engage in certain spiritual practices, you will serve and work, but you will do these things in response to the deep love you feel for the face or faces most dear to you.

These are the four Hindu Yogas: the Yoga of the Rational Mind, the Yoga of the Transcending Mind, the Yoga of Service, and the Yoga of Love - four different kinds of spiritualities. They are not tied to theological preferences but to four different ways of being spiritual, as distinct from one another as are the Myers-Briggs personality types.

Of course, many of us, probably most of us, have some of each of the four yogas in us, but we will probably be most comfortable most of the time in one or the other. As I said before: they are all present among the people in our Unitarian Universalist congregations, in my congregation, in your congregation, in this congregation. I think these are the differences we covenant, we agree, we promise, to accept when we recite our Third Unitarian Universalist Principle.

Please notice that this ancient Hindu wisdom from thousands and thousands of years ago says that all four of these are spiritual paths. No one preference is more "spiritual" than another. The Yoga of the Rational Mind is just much a spiritual path as is the Yoga of the Transcending Mind. The Yoga of Service is as valid a spirituality as is the Yoga of Love. I believe we must respect and honor each of these paths, all of these paths, if we are to respect and honor the Third Unitarian Universalist Principle we say we affirm and promote. If we are to be in covenant with each other in this faith, as we say we are, we cannot allow ourselves to believe that our style, our preference, our Yoga is better than any of the others. It's not. It's just different.

And what about the second clause of that Third Principle: "Encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations"? To me that means that we are obligated as a Unitarian Universalist congregation, I believe, to nourish and support all four of these Yogas. For,

as I said and I as believe, prompted by the ancient Hindus, one is not a better or more valid path than the others.

How do we do this as a congregation?

Now, it is tempting to look to the various programs of the church to “take care of” the four different Yogas. One might want to say, “Our social action activities meet the needs of the Service yogis among us; or, working with children’s religious education or on the Caring Committee or perhaps even the Hospitality or Membership Committees take care of the Yoga of Love; our adult religious education programs support the Yoga of the Rational Mind; certain ones of our Covenant Groups nourish those who prefer the Yoga of the Transcending Mind. And, of course, those various programs do - and should - appeal to and support particular spiritual types.

But, I submit to you that it is our Sunday morning worship service that is the heart of the spiritual growth program for a congregation and that Sunday morning worship must try to meet the needs of all four of these kinds of spiritual people.

Now, of course, every Sunday will not be able to satisfy everyone’s spiritual needs and desires and preferences to the same extent. Perhaps some particular Sundays will be heavy on the Yoga of the Rational Mind while others will focus on the Transcendent Mind.

But will we make sure some particular services emphasize the love present in our community or it is possible, and enough, for an overlay of love always to be present, almost palpable in our Sunday morning worship? And how might we incorporate the Yoga of Service into our worship, at least some of the time? Or should it be a goal to include at least some elements addressing all four of the spiritualities in most, if not all, of our Sunday services?

These are difficult questions to answer; this is a difficult thing to do. I know that. I don’t have the perfect solution to this. Our typical UU services often speak to either the Rational Mind or to the Transcending Mind; sometimes to the Loving Mind; rarely, I’m afraid, to the mind that places service above all else. But I think that if we are truly to abide by that Third Principle, we must abandon our either/or thinking as much as possible and try to embrace both/and perspectives around our worship services. And, do our best to satisfy, in our worship services, the deep need for spiritual experiences, which devotees of all the Four Yogas have.

We can do this - you can do this - at least over the course of a whole church year we can do it. I encourage those of you on your Worship Team this year, in collaboration with your new minister, to see if you can move your congregation in the direction of greater intentionality in the planning of both each individual worship service and in shaping the sweep of the entire liturgical year, so as to try to “encourage spiritual growth” for all the Yogas present in your congregation. I know that you have as a goal “to maintain a balance of types of services and topics addressed [in your worship

services] in order to meet the widely diverse beliefs, needs and desires of [your] congregation.” I read that in the very excellent Worship Committee Action Plan that is on your website. So, you are already trying to do this. But, I challenge you to keep in mind, not only the diverse theologies and beliefs your people hold, but also the four Spiritual Yogas they represent.

So, I’m saying that the worship leadership in your church has an obligation, I believe, to attend to this matter of our Third Principle. But, just as importantly - maybe more importantly - I believe that every single one of you, whether you have anything to do with planning worship for Wildflower Church or not, each one of you sitting out there in the chairs on Sunday mornings - those of you who have accepted the rights and responsibilities of membership in this congregation, have something you are obligated to do in this regard, as well.

Now, maybe I don’t need to be saying this to the members of Wildflower Church. Maybe there is no one here who operates the way some of the members of my home congregation do regarding Sunday morning services. And, if that’s the case, then I apologize for wasting the next couple of minutes of your time. But, I’m going to say this anyway, just in case there is someone out there to whom it might apply.

Here is what I think: Regardless of whether you are or are not a part of the Worship Team here at Wildflower Church, if you are truly to be in covenant with the other members of this congregation -- you must come to worship every Sunday that you possibly can, whether or not the style or the content of the worship service for a particular Sunday appeals to you - whether or not it fits your Spiritual Yoga.

For to truly show “acceptance of one another” as the Third Principle requires, you must demonstrate that acceptance by being there when another person’s spirituality comes to the fore. Of course, it might just encourage your own spiritual growth for you to listen for a message being delivered with a different focus than the one you prefer; it might be good for you to try to learn from something you may not be entirely comfortable with. But that’s not the point I want to make.

The point is this: whether you “get anything out of” a particular worship service or not, you should be there to support the people whose needs are being met by that service, the people whose spiritual growth you have agreed to encourage, to whom you have made a promise, with whom you are in covenant. You should not pick and choose to attend just those worship services that promise to appeal to your personal preferences, for when you are not in the chairs on a Sunday morning for this reason, you are saying by your absence that you do not accept one another, and you are not willing to encourage the spiritual growth of those members of Wildflower Church whose Yoga is different from yours.

Now, the worship leadership of the congregation, has, I believe, an obligation to encourage you to deepen your preferred spirituality, the one that is natural and comfortable for you, by not ignoring the needs of your spiritual type - by not failing to

consider what will nourish and develop your Yoga - within the context of the Sunday morning services and elsewhere in the church's programming. I believe you have the right to ask, and expect, that of your Unitarian Universalist congregation.

But you as an individual also have an obligation to encourage the spiritual growth of even those people whose spirituality is radically different from yours by your respectful presence in worship services that speak most particularly to them, by sitting side by side with them in worship and wishing them well on their journey. I believe the congregation has the right to ask, and expect, that of you. That is what I think our Third Principle means. That is a part of how we can live out the covenant we have made with one another.

How interesting, how rich, how inspiring, and how loving would our congregational life be if we could truly accept each other and encourage each other to deepen and strengthen our individual yogas? If we could sit beside each other in the pews with minds and spirits and arms and hearts that are truly open?

If we are Unitarian Universalists, if ours is a covenantal faith, if we have freely entered into this agreement that are our seven Principles, if we have promised these things to each other, I cannot see how we can do less.

Choices - good choices, poor choices - we all make them every day. We make them, not only in our individual lives outside these walls, but also as we participate in the life of this religious community. "It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are." We have chosen this faith freely. We have chosen to be in covenant with one another. May we grow in our own individual spiritualities; may we grow in our collective Unitarian Universalist faith. This is my hope for you as a congregation. This is my hope for us as a faith. This is my hope for us as a thinking, experiencing, serving, and loving people.

Amen.