

The First Principle

January 20, 2008

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We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Well, that settles it. Any questions?

When I was asked to speak on this principle, I thought, OK, no big deal. Preaching to the choir kind of stuff. And I know these people! What a great audience! I began to fantasize: “wow, this might make people think of me as a UU. They may even let me join a committee!” It might even be an opportunity to get in good with the Sunday Services Coordinator!

Then I began to think. And to read. And study. And meditate. I found that the simplicity of this principle had abandoned me. I started to think no, I cannot affirm this principle; the language is vague; there no action clause in the statement. I was not bothered by the ubiquitous worth of Hitler argument as much as by the problem that the principle might just as well say “blah, blah, blah, blah.” I found myself wanting to grab the principle and shake it: “tell me what you want from me!?”

Days and weeks passed, and still I could only hear the principle as jungle cacophony.

One day a passage from Chiam Potek's novel *The Chosen* entered my mind. There is a scene when Reb Saunders, a brilliant Hasidic Talmudist, is studying Talmud with his son, Danny, and Danny's friend Reuvan. Reuvan, who is not a Hasid, claims that the passage they are arguing about cannot be understood without considering Aramaic grammar.

“‘Grammar!’ Reb Saunders threw up his hands. ‘Grammar we need yet!’”

This remembrance was not accompanied by insight. However, it kept rubbing up against my consciousness, coaxing me, and slowly I began to realize that I had allowed myself to be trapped by the unwieldiness of this “simple” first principle. Communication.

Language. Grammar. Maybe I should think about the when and the how of the principle's use? Maybe I should look at *the words* that people had chosen to soak up the immense concept of this first principle. After all, it consists of a mere eight words.

I have long been aware of my mixed feelings about the use of repetitive language. On one hand, I have learned to recognize the value of mantras, and use them frequently to change thought patterns or behavior. “I think I can, I think I can” said the little train. I have also spent time reciting the sacred “Om” and have experienced its ability to cleanse the mind of clutter.

On the other hand, I have a mistrust of repetitive language because it tends to desensitize.

As a public school teacher, I watch each school day begin with “I pledge allegiance to the flag...” I cannot remember the last time I said the pledge, but my pledgeless streak probably goes back to the ‘60’s. Because I am not a pledger, I have spent decades watching students robotically repeat the pledge that for the most part means nothing to them.

Sometimes I ask students why they say it. “Because we have to.”

“Really?” I respond. “Says who?”

“It’s the law.”

This is not true. In 1943, a period noted for its patriotic feeling, the Supreme Court ruled that schools did not have the authority to force students to recite the pledge. Although frequently challenged, the ruling has never been overturned. The ruling has even survived our time of post 9/11 patriotic fervor. When this fact is presented to students, they shrug and confess that they really do not care about the pledge; it’s just something they mumble to start their school day. Most students say that they don’t care about the pledge one way or another. In fact when challenged, they confess that they have little understanding as to what the pledge means and why they say it. Who cares about the phrase “under god” anyway? It’s always been there, right?

This pledge, when thoughtlessly repeated, creates blisters on the hands of democracy that can prevent it from doing its work. Although in the catalogue of wounds blisters are not considered a big deal, they nevertheless are invitations to infections. Frequent recitation of creeds and pledges can be dangerous because the process can numb the brain and spirit by making the familiar the unchanging in a world in need of constant change.

The inherent worth and dignity of every person. All coins have an assigned worth. The youngest of children quickly learn to recognize the difference between a dime and a penny, and soon after, the following recognition that one is worth more than the other. At the same time they are mastering this task of discrimination, they are mastering other tasks of discrimination such as which people are valuable and which are not. Given the state of human interaction in our world, it is inconceivable that even with omniscient diligence, we can protect a child from encountering the concept that some people are more valuable than others. Consider this homey example: “We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal.” Equal? Not exactly. The Framers of the Declaration were conscious and serious about being exclusionary. They placed themselves firmly in line with the cultural norms of their times by excluding among others, slaves, Indians, those who were not land owners, and women, who comprised a mere 50% of the population.

But here’s news: things change.

A moment ago I used the word “inconceivable.” Here it is again: it is inconceivable to imagine a time when there have not been people who were challenging cultural norms that are responsible for destructive prejudices. And who are these people? First of all, they are individuals. It would be lovely if societies could transform from parched fields to places of nourishing production as the result of some sudden heavenly summer rain. But it does not seem to happen that way. It appears that the model for human attitudinal change starts with individuals.

And who are these individuals? They are people who have made a conscious choice to accept the idea of the inherent worth and dignity of every person. They are people who have made the choice not to get involved with chicken-and-egg arguments as to whether or not suicide bombers or invading rulers possess inherent worth and dignity because this is not where their lives are lived. Their lives are lived in each moment and with each decision as to how they will respond to the person or persons in front of them. And to choose any other option than to treat people as having inherent worth and dignity makes no practical or spiritual sense.

Unitarian Universalists demonstrated that the first principle is alive and well when a resolution presented at the 1977 General Assembly in Ithaca New York eliminated the word “brotherhood,” a term which had survived the 1976 language revisions, from the principles. The Unitarian Universalist first principle is alive and well because individuals choose to think about it and challenge it rather than mechanically recite it. It is alive and

well because we recognize that making spiritual choices also demands us to make these choices manifest in our moment to moment lives. In doing so, we see that there is no first principle if ours lives do not speak it.