

The Unitarian Universalist 2nd Principle

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Welcome to the second in our series of presentations on the seven principles of the UUA. Two weeks ago, you heard Jack Miller give an articulate and inspired talk on the 1st Principle, the inherent worth and dignity of every person. He reminded us, very convincingly, that there is no 1st principle if our lives do not speak it.

I see these principles as equivalent to a constitution, or perhaps a statement of purpose or mission that you might find in the strategic plan of any corporation. These principles define what we say to ourselves about ourselves and therefore bind us together as a community. They are used to tell others who we are in the hope that they may choose to assist us in our mission, or at least understand us a little better. They speak to what impact we, as a religious community, desire to have upon society.

Principle II. We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote...justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

Let me begin.

The year is 1957. I am 12 years old.

C: Bless me father for I have sinned. It has been one week since my last confession. I stole a bag of potato chips from Mr. Cohen's grocery store, I had impure thoughts, and I said the F word.That's all father.

F: How many times, my son.

C: Which one Father?

F: The impure thoughts.

C: Just once Father.

F: Be careful my son.

C: Yes, Father.

F: For your penance, say three Hail Mary's, three Our Fathers, and three Glory Be's. Now say a good Act of Contrition.

C: O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended thee and I detest all my sins because of thy just punishment, but most of all because they offend thee, my God, etc. etc. etc.

F: Go in peace, my son.

C: Thank you, Father.

It was like a course in Justice 101. Crime and punishment. Until I encountered the “confession” procedure of growing up Catholic, my transgressions, so to speak, were dealt with by my parents whose manner was to express disappointment and, usually quite successfully, have me feel shamed by whatever I did wrong and, if possible, correct it. Sometimes I would feel that shame even if they never found out about it. But when I walked into that confession, it was purely a matter of crime and punishment, and rarely, if ever, was restoration or restitution part of the process. I was to fear the punishment of God (and we all know what that can be – usually having something to do with fire) and I was to be sorry for offending God. The offense felt by Mr. Cohen the grocer was not an issue. Nor was I counseled that an occasional “impure thought” was normal for a young man going through puberty, and never was it mentioned that the F word was just a word, and I would not have to withstand the fires of hell just for saying a word.

By the time I was eighteen, and the bags of potato chips got larger, the impure thoughts had turned to impure deeds, and the F word became part of my daily vocabulary, I abandoned confessing my sins.

- *It didn't feel right*
- *It made no sense.*
- *I chose, contrary to the expectations of friends and family, not to do it anymore.*

Now, a fantasy.....

The year is 2007:

C: Bless me Father for I have sinned. I have never been to confession. From 1979 to 2003, while President of Iraq, I was responsible for the torture and murder of thousands of my people. I carried out a campaign of genocide against the Kurds where 182,000 people were killed. I used chemical weapons against the Kurds causing the death of 5,000 people and the sickness or disfigurement of 10,000. I invaded Kuwait and in my retreat I caused an environmental disaster by igniting all their oil wells. I suppressed a Shiite uprising by destroying their villages and draining the marshes they relied upon.

F: How many times, my son?

C: Which one, Father?

F: The Kuwait invasion.

C: Just once Father.

F: Be careful my son.

C: Yes, Father.

F: For your penance, you will be brought into a room where a rope will be tied around your neck. Your weight, height and build will be evaluated by a hangman who will calculate the required drop height, somewhere between 5 to 9 feet. The knot of the noose will be placed on the left side of your neck, under your jaw. During that process you will be taunted and cursed by your enemies, and a brief film will be made for broadcast around the world. At the designated moment, the floor will open and you will drop. Your spinal cord should break. Brain death will take several minutes to occur, but complete death will take 15 to 20 minutes. Now go in peace my son.

C: Thank you, Father.

Was this justice? What purpose, I wonder, was served by the execution of Saddam Hussein. For that matter, what purpose is served by any execution? Did it serve as a warning to another despot somewhere that if he didn't mend his ways, this could happen to him. Did it give the Kurdish or Shia population satisfaction or somehow lessen the suffering they withstood or lessen the anger that dwells within them? I think not. I wonder how many of us, watching the news that day or hearing of the execution thought that Saddam had gotten what he deserved, even those of us who fought the death penalty in New Jersey. If Saddam had been a resident of Egg Harbor Township, would that have changed anything? I wonder. We listened as the broadcast news declared that Saddam had been "brought to Justice." What we observed, however, was the dark side of justice: retribution, vengeance, blood lust, and we, as a country, eagerly participated in it.

- *It didn't feel right*
- *It made no sense.*
- *I choose now to speak out against it, to the consternation of many, I am sure.*

When Jack Miller spoke about the inherent worth and dignity of every person, he mentioned the ubiquitous "worth of Hitler" argument. Similarly, when we talk of justice, equity and compassion, and our particular opposition to the death penalty, do we include the Saddam Husseins of the world. How passionate are we in our convictions and how far are we willing to go.

Hmm, let's do one more.....

C: Bless me father for I have sinned. I have never been to confession. As President of the United States from January 2001 until today, I allowed 47 million citizens to have no health care, of which 8 million are children. My country is ranked 41st in infant mortality, behind Cuba and South Korea. I refused to enforce environmental laws or international treaties in favor of big corporations. I allowed US corporations to buy items from nations that use slavery and child labor, while putting American workers out of jobs. I continue to ignore the problem of global warming. I invaded Iraq under false pretenses dropping 1000 pound bombs in the middle of Baghdad in a process of "shock and awe," that others might call terrorism. I caused the death of nearly 4,000 American soldiers and injured 28,000. About 85,000 civilians have met violent deaths, untold numbers injured, and 2,000,000 have left their homes. The death and destruction continue and I have no plans to end it.

F: How many times, my son?

C: Which one, Father?

F: The Iraq invasion.

C: Just once Father. You must be thinking about my dad – he went into Iraq the first time.....but I am thinking about bombing Iran!

F: Be careful my son.

C: Yes, Father.

F: For your penance.....For your penance.....

There will be no penance my son.

C: Thank you, Father.

- *It doesn't feel right*
- *It makes no sense.*
- *We must continue to speak out against it.*

What then is justice? Like Jack, I found that coming to grips with the true meaning of justice was a particularly difficult challenge because it carries with it so many diverse meanings depending on the context in which it is used. Environmental justice. Racial justice. Criminal justice. Economic justice. Social Justice.

What I would like to do now is present three propositions of justice and I hope to validate them based upon selected readings from philosophers, psychologists and anthropologists with, as promised and without apology, a secular humanist bias.

Proposition Number 1. A definition of justice

As simply put as possible (and the rumble you are about to hear are several 19th and 20th century philosophers rolling over in their graves):

Justice is the presence of good. Good is the absence of evil. Evil are those things that prevent all people from living together in harmony, happiness and personal fulfillment. Therefore, justice is the absence of evil. And where evil exists, justice does not.

Proposition Number 2. Where to find justice.

I contend that justice resides in all of us, in different degrees, more easily manifested in some than in others, but we all, having the same evolutionary history and approximate cultural background, retain that essential instinct that tells us what behaviors facilitate our survival as a community - and what do not. I

see this as a ribbon that runs through us all and despite distorted motives, personal tragedies that may bias us towards evil, psychological or emotional damage, prejudices, and the like, we know, without explanation, and without philosophical guidance, the difference between right and wrong. This concept of the inherent goodness in all people is most commonly referred to as “moral intuition” or perhaps our “moral compass.”

We also have the ability to come together as a group and by consensus, discussion and logical debate wipe away the inconsistencies, the kinks in this ribbon of morality, and find a concept of justice. This is an essential element of democracy, open societies, trial by jury. In statistical language, some might see this as a search for the central tendency in a population, essentially eliminating outliers and finding the essential truth.

Proposition Number 3. How to implement justice in ourselves and in our society.

And how do we know what is evil and whether or not justice is being served? I further suggest when we, as individuals or as a society,

1. Examine our own feelings and the moral principles that we draw out of them (Moral Intuition)
2. Use our reasoning ability to support or balance those principles (Reason)
3. Find the courage to act in a personal and societal fashion in support of those principles. (Courage)

Then justice exists. Put another way:

- *It has to feel right*
- *It must make sense.*
- *We must act accordingly.*

Moral Intuition, Reason, Courage yields Justice!

In preparing for this presentation, I was very pleased to hear Mike Cluff’s report of the survey of membership in terms of what we were looking for in our new minister. As I interpret that result, we are looking for inspiration which will hopefully validate our moral positions, and for intellectualism which will satisfy our need to reason, and leadership.

I will return to these topics in a moment after I hopscotch through history selectively plucking events that further support the central point of those propositions, that justice comes from within.

Code of Hammurabi (1796 – 1750 BC)

The code is believed to be the first example of the legal concept that some laws are basic, and intrinsically obvious to the community. Hammurabi had the laws inscribed into stone as evidence that even he, as King could not change them. There was no claim by Hammurabi that these laws were dictated by God. They were just “obvious” and it was presumed that all citizens could see the righteousness they represented. They were intended to destroy the evil-doers so the strong should not harm the weak, and to bring about well-being to the oppressed. And if you read them, you could see the common sense within

them in terms of interpersonal behavior, but they were written in a culture that relied on severe retribution for enforcement. They focused primarily on theft, agriculture, general commerce, husband/wife fidelity, etc. There was restoration, equality (at least among non-slaves and men), but no compassion, no forgiveness. But what intrigued me was the idea that even at that time, it was believed that human beings could ascribe to civil rules governing society that did not require direction from a God, or even a king. They came from within as being “obvious” or one might say “intuitive.”

Now a message from Hammurabi to our fellow congregant, Chris Holaday, who is supervising our new building:

“If a builder build a house for someone, and does not construct it properly, and the house which he built fall in and kill its owner, then that builder shall be put to death.”

How’s that for an air-tight warranty, Chris?

Aeschylus (525 BC to 455 BC)

Aeschylus is considered the father of tragedy, and his trilogy, the Oresteia, is considered outstanding not only because it appears to be anti-war in its sentiments, and optimistic in terms of its vision the future of humanity, but because it is a striking metaphor for the transition of Greek politics from monarchy, to tyranny and, finally, democracy. Most importantly, it:

- Clearly presents the problematic nature of revenge, bloodlust and retribution
- Characterizes ego and the lust for power as even more problematic
- Presents justice as the responsibility of the community, and not of the gods
- Envisions a judicial system based on consensus, group discussions, and juries.

In other words, it recognizes the capacity of human beings to judge with feeling and compassion – 2000 years ago.

Ian Johnston, one of the many translators of Aeschylus and a respected author, essayist, and professor of Liberal Studies observed “If justice is to be a matter of persuasion, it cannot violate the deepest feelings we have (and have always had) about justice. Justice is not just a matter of debate, but also a matter of feeling,”

That is, it must

- *Makes sense*
- *Feel right*

Are you getting the message?

Plato (424BC to 348 BC) Socrates (470-399)

Plato argued (using the semi-historical character Socrates) that a human being is just when his three “souls” are acting in harmony for the good of the person as a whole, namely,

- The rational or thinking soul, or again what we might call Reason
- The spirited or willing soul, or what we might call Courage
- The appetitive or moderating soul, or what we might call Feeling or intuition

There’s that theme again....

According to Plato, justice is a quality of the soul, it is strength in harmony with the entire self, and is an “inward grace and its understanding is shown to involve a study of the inner man”

Starting to sound familiar?

Plato, unfortunately, extended the three soul analogy one step further into his interpretation as to how the state should function arguing that just as humans had to be in balance, so did the state and that we each had to accept our position in life. What he promoted was an elitist society headed by kings who were, of course, philosophers, just like him.

Jonathan Haidt (Social and Moral Psychologist)

As Joseph Campbell has been called the first UU saint, I am close to requesting beatification of Jonathan Haidt. Well, not really. I think he still has a few questions to answer, a fact that he admits himself. I’m going to paraphrase what I learned in an interview conducted in Believer Magazine in August, 2005. I really recommend that you read this interview – and as for me, it provided satisfactory answers to questions I have had regarding moral behavior and the seeking of justice.

Haidt believes, that when it comes to moral judgments, we think we’re scientists discovering the truth. But actually we’re lawyers arguing for positions derived by other means. Our minds have evolved to feel pleasure and displeasure at patterns in the social world. We when we see someone cheat, we feel displeasure. When we see a heroic act of charity, we feel warm and elevated. Then we use reason (the lawyer) to justify our position. These feelings are ingrained in our minds through the evolutionary process. Again, reason and feeling are acting together.

Dorothy Gale (L.Frank Baum, 1856 – 1919)

Think about the popularity of the story of the Wizard of Oz. The movie version of L. Frank Baum’s tale is rated as one of the top ten movies of all time. I never miss it, have on VHS at home, and I still tear up when I hear Dorothy exclaim “Oh Auntie Em, there’s no place like home.” What is it about this film that touches so many people? I believe that Baum, perhaps by accident, touched upon the essence of what we all sense. That to destroy evil and find home (or harmony and peace and justice), we need a combination of heart (moral intuition or the tin man), brains (reason or the scarecrow) and courage (force of will or the lion).

Feeling, reason, courage.....

Not a great guy, L. Frank Baum, who said he only wrote the story ‘to please children and generate income for his family’ Unfortunately, while an advocate of women’s suffrage, his was forcefully anti-American-Indian and went so far in editorials to recommend their eradication.

Semai tribe of Malaysia

The web site www.peacefulsocieties.org presents a list of 25 societies around the world in which there is very little internal violence or external warfare. Generalizations are difficult to make accurately, except that most of the time these peaceful societies successfully promote harmony, gentleness, and kindness toward others as much as they devalue conflict, aggressiveness, and violence. There are few instances of violent or vengeful gods.

The Semai, who have been almost untouched by modern culture, have a strongly nonviolent image of themselves; they proclaim themselves to be nonviolent people who do not get angry or hit others. In fact, they do quarrel and get angry at times, but aggressive expressions of anger are rare, and they almost never hit their children. They see themselves as non-aggressive, dependent and nurturing. A self-image that allowed aggression would contradict their definition of virtue. Their worldview, and humanity's place in it, does not include any violence. They see themselves as helplessly surrounded by hostile forces, both natural and supernatural, and they proceed with caution in all their daily activities in the face of ubiquitous dangers. Security comes only from the sharing, peace and integration of their villages.

Now for some monkey business.

Capuchin Monkeys

National Geographic, September, 2003

Researchers taught brown capuchin monkeys to swap tokens for food. Usually they were happy to exchange this "money" for cucumber. But if they saw another monkey getting a grape - a more-liked food - they took offence. Some refused to work, while others took the food and refused to eat it.

Scientists say this work suggests that human's sense of justice is inherited and not a social construct. It looks like this behavior is evolved. There's some good evolutionary reason why we don't like being treated unfairly. This behavior suggests that human cooperation is made more effective by a sense of fairness.

The research was reported in the journal Nature. There is much more to this story but time prohibits further discussion today.

So in conclusion, let me present a metaphor that might elucidate the essential elements of my presentation today:

Think of justice as a tree standing alone unprotected in a field. It is rooted in the need of our species to survive and prosper in interdependent communities of humans and so it draws upon our moral intuition, that subconscious internal guidepost derived from learned and re-learned behaviors over the millennia. It has been fertilized by our ability to learn, rationalize, reason and judge. It has been tortured and stressed, bent from side to side by the winds of hatred, greed, envy, ego, ambition, demagoguery, religious bigotry, the vengeful and wrathful gods created by man, and all the less desirable qualities of human beings that detract from our ability to live together in peace. From time-to-time it succumbs to these winds, growing a little crooked, but always returning through the courage and strength of our convictions. It has been bolstered and braced against these winds by the human qualities of equity or fairness, and compassion or love, without which the tree of justice will fall.

The strength, durability and resilience of the tree of justice is evidenced in the observation that despite the historical abuses and cruel use of power, the Hitlers, Stalins, Idi Amin's, Saddam Husseins down to the less-obvious but pervasive behaviors of petty crooks, thieves, liars and their ilk, we come here today affirming, as citizens of this good earth, our desire for justice.

Our hymn today is “We shall Overcome” And as you sing, I call your attention to the expression of hope in these words. They originate not in reason or logic, but in that common metaphor for human aspirations and feelings, the human heart.