

The Third Principle

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One from Frost

I'd like to read a well worn poem by Robert Frost:

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village, though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Many years ago I saw an interview with Frost. The interviewer said to him that many readers had said that the poem was a death wish. Frost responded "that's a terrible thing to say about a poem." I can't understand how one could come to such a conclusion. To me the poem is a meditation, it is life affirming. When you wake on a spring day to the songs of birds, you don't analyze it. Well perhaps Richard would analyze it. You simply absorb the experience. But eventually the world intervenes and you must leave the moment behind.

PRINCIPLES

Last fall Melissa Hutchinson asked me to give one of the services on our principles and I respectfully declined. She graciously did not press me on it. I breathed a sigh of relief thinking I had dodged that issue. But when Barbara Miller subsequently e-mailed me

asking if I would do a service on one of the principles, my first reaction was panic. I mean, how do you turn down Barbara? After all she's a self confessed religious zealot. When the panic subsided, I asked myself "what the hell are the 3rd and 6th principles." I've got the 1st and 7th down pretty well, the inherent worth of all and respect for the planet and its life. But the rest were a kind of middle muddle to me. I started a search for the principles through my desk, for any paper that had anything to do with the UUA or our congregation with no luck. I went online and looked at our home page and the UUA home page with still no luck. I then, when still under the UUA home page, googled "principles" and viola there they were. I figured there had to be lots of wise essays there on the individual principles that I could steal from. Alas not much of great depth. Thrown on my own devices, panic returned. I concluded that in the future I had to keep my mouth shut and hide. I needed a chalice to light my way into the darkness, a foothold to that first step.

Many years back, I was working on a project retrieving data from a hardware storage device into a computer and processing the data. This was still a time when data processing was not very sophisticated. Not understanding the whole nature of the data, I kept going to the engineer and asking him, "But what do the numbers mean?" Being indicative of the different perspectives of an engineer and a computer programmer/analyst, he didn't understand my question. During that interview with Robert Frost, I remember the interviewer asking him what the poem "Stopping by Woods" meant. Obviously he didn't share my clairvoyance. Frost said: "It means what it says." Needless to say the issue between the engineer and me eventually resolved itself, and I concluded the numbers meant what they were.

Several years before that, while living on Staten Island, I found there was a Unitarian church several miles away. I resolved to give it a try. So one Sunday I drove there for its service. The minister's address had something to do with, "What is a Unitarian?" It came out to me as one who loves his/her partner, mother, apple pie and neighbors. Perhaps I'm being unfair to him, but I was not impressed.

The 3rd principle reads, "Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations." That seems clear enough. But as I thought about it, I began asking myself, "But what do the words really mean." Are the principles a guide for us, or do they reflect us? Do we have a feel good relationship with our principles so that we can feel smug and superior while basically ignoring them in our lives? Are they mere platitudes? Do we treat them as many school children treat the pledge of allegiance "one nation invisible under god?" (Which just may be prescient.) Or perhaps like the twisted logic of the Supreme Court when addressing a challenge to the use of "In God We Trust" on our currency saying, "Its use is of a patriotic or ceremonial character and bears no true resemblance to a governmental sponsorship of religious exercise". Huh? Need I ask what do the words mean? It sure inspires confidence in the vision and wisdom of our supreme judiciary doesn't it.

As I studied the principle further it seemed to me to be not one but two principles, acceptance and encouragement. Thus I had the job of addressing two principles unlike the

slackers who have only one to address. I suppose it can be said that the two are linked, but it seems to me they can be more easily inspected as two. So what do the words really mean? It's not like you can go to the dictionary and find an adequate definition.

“Acceptance of one another.”

Each Sunday when we come together we bring with us our concerns, our hopes, our ideas, our fears, our humor, etc. We come from different walks of life. We have different perspectives on life and stresses in life. Do we think we can avoid misunderstandings and disagreements? I think not. We cannot expect to understand all of our different perspectives. We cannot expect that our differences will not conflict. The question is how do we deal with our differences, our misunderstandings? Do we shut each other off, or do we reach out to each other. We must expect that our differences will be respected.

Unitarian/Universalism invites this, no demands this. Last December we received an e-mail that said: “at its meeting last night the Board unanimously agreed to the following policy: our Yahoo Group may not be used for the purpose of discussing personal disagreements with other individuals or groups within the UUCSJS. Personal disagreements are better handled on a one-on-one basis.” This happened when I was busy on other personal matters and I didn't get around to responding, but it was greeted by others with general agreement. Certainly personal disagreements are better handled on a one-on-one basis. Communities have fractured by divisions within them. But something about it made me uneasy. I asked myself, what are we afraid of? For one thing it seemed to do itself what it said was not to be done. It brought a local situation, if not a specific situation, to the general population. And now I compound the problem by bringing it again to you. I had to ask myself, did I miss something? I was unaware of any seismic shift that might have occurred in our community. But if it had, I would expect someone to step in and suggest that perhaps this was something that should not involve the entire congregation. What concerns me is that things like this can shut down communication. Is that necessary for Acceptance? Although it is wise to exercise some self censorship, “Acceptance” should not demand suppression of ideas, concerns or differences. Some may be reluctant to bring real concerns to the congregation. They too have a right to be heard. If by “Acceptance” we mean the avoidance of controversy, it's a pretty weak principle. But to disagree with each other and still “Accept” and respect each other is profound. We should feel free to challenge each other. If the board's message had read “our Yahoo Group should not be used” instead of “may not” I might not have felt so uneasy about it at all. It seems to me that you cannot separate Acceptance from caring. And caring subsumes disagreement or controversy.

I think there is an excellent barometer of acceptance within our UU community. It is “Joys and Concerns.” I am aware of the effort over time to smooth the Joys and Concerns period of our service. Obviously we don't want to have the situation of someone with a political axe to grind, or someone delivering a long detailed dissertation on some subject. But Joys and Concerns is a fragile thing. It can be undermined by being either too loose or too tight. Sometimes it requires risk of exposure. I know I have sat wondering, should I do this? Is it appropriate? Joys and Concerns should not be an intellectual experience, a

learning experience of the mind, it should be a learning experience of the heart. The willingness to speak our closely held feelings to share meaningful moments in our lives is the measure of our trust in each other. Trust is the other side of Acceptance.

As a community, we have demonstrated a large degree of acceptance. For some the decision to be a Welcoming Congregation was a wrenching one, but we passed the test and I think we grew in the process. The split with George was for many of us hurtful, but because we cared we have survived and prospered. In both cases we had a free exchange of thoughts.

“Encouragement to Spiritual Growth in our Congregations”

A UU minister was giving an address on the development of UU thought and belief over time. He said to the congregation: “It is probable that now no one here believes in the divinity of Jesus, as the Christ, the son of God.” Where upon someone in the sanctuary jumped up and shouted “But we can if we want to.” I have seen a bumper sticker that proclaimed “Militant agnostic. I don’t know and neither do you.”

That we come to here and sit together shows at least passive encouragement to spiritual growth. Over the years we have conducted services on Atheism, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Humanism, Judaism, Islam, Pagan and Earth based faiths; we have celebrated equinox and solstice. We have celebrated the birth of Jesus, had Christian communion and Seder suppers. We have done this as a spiritual search. Often it has been a moving experience. Encouragement to Spiritual growth is something that we live in our services. When I ask myself what the words really mean I come to perhaps the most fundamental of roots of our community. What is meant here is that you are not only free, you are compelled to seek your own spiritual path. And this is an on going search. We are all on the same journey, but we travel different paths. There is no guided tour dictated by doctrine. I wonder how many of us would be here without this principle. We are Atheists, Agnostics, Theists, Christians, Jews, Humanists, Wiccans, Buddhists, Muslims, etc., each of us in search of a spiritual home, a spiritual community that does not oppress us. So in this diversity of beliefs, what is there to hold us together? For some reason on most Sundays we find ourselves here. We could be comfortably at home with a cup of coffee and the newspaper or surfing the ocean, or riding a motorcycle or riding a bicycle. You didn’t think I’d go thru this without mentioning that did you? There are those who would claim that we are not a religion at all and some of them may even be here. But most of you and I know better. And I think that we could convince the skeptics. We simply lack the arrogance to assume we have all the answers. We reject the easy answers of doctrine. I can’t understand the worship of the unknown to the neglect of the known. The UU musician and composer Jim Scott put it to us this way one Sunday a while back that, “We worship the creation, not the creator.” So what is it that brings us here? We reach for words to explain it like awe, humility, wonder, worship. I think the operative word here is reverence. Without this principle, without a sense of shared reverence of life we would simply be an issue oriented discussion group. There is nothing wrong with that, and we want to be intellectually challenged, but it is not really who we are, not why we are here.

Institutional Christianity assumes that reverence is their domain only, that free thinkers, humanists, cannot experience true, deep reverence. But when I left my Christian church because I could no longer accept the doctrine of any religious sect, I didn't leave my sense of reverence behind. I took it with me. Back then I rejected all institutional religions because I felt that they kept their members in a spiritual bondage. But this religious institution rejects bondage, it dares you to question. When I walk through a garden after spring rains and feel the spongy spring of the earth under my feet, I am filled with a sense of reverence. When I look at the stars in the night sky, and think of those stunning pictures from the Hubble telescope, when I listen to the late night roar and song of the near by ocean, when I hear rain caress the leaves in a forest, when I see the struggling morning sun escape the oceans clutch on the horizon, feel its warmth chase the night chill and watch it in the evening be devoured by the bay, I am filled with a sense of reverence. And when I walk through these doors on a Sunday morning, I bring that reverence with me. When I hear the happy babble, see people paired off, caring, see others sitting quietly, centering, and I find words of so many of our hymns so meaningful, so penetrating, I have difficulty singing them, I am filled with a sense of reverence. And when I read these principles, that seem to weave themselves together, to complement each other, but especially with the 3rd and the 7th my sense of reverence is reinforced.

“To watch his woods fill up with snow.”
“The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.”

Frost's poem is no death wish; it is a moment of quiet contemplation, of reverence. We have heard some tell us how grateful they are to have found Unitarian/Universalism and this community, to have finally grown to adulthood in their 40's. We are free to choose to believe. When Peg and I learned of a group trying to start a UU congregation here in South Jersey, we were filled with excitement, hope, anticipation. You have not disappointed us. I think the foundation, the source the very essence of reverence is love. And like a river, when it finds an accepting path, love flows there. I believe this community is an accepting path. I am always concerned that repetition may turn to cliché. But I can find no better way to sum up my feelings than this: “Spirit of Life”. Please remain seated.

Afterword

What Is There Beyond Knowing - Mary Oliver

What is there beyond knowing that keeps
Calling to me? I can't

Turn any direction
But it's there. I don't mean

the leaves grip and shine or even the thrush's
silk song, but the far off

fires, for example,
of the stars, heaven's slowly turning

theater of the light, or the wind
playful with its breath:

or time that's always rushing forward,
or standing still

in the same --- what shall I say ---
moment.

What I know
I could put into a pack

As if it were bread and cheese, and carry it
On one shoulder,

Important and honorable, but so small!
While everything else continues, unexplained

and unexplainable.

How wonderful it is
To follow a thought quietly

To its logical end.
I have done this a few times.

But mostly I just stand in the dark field
In the middle of the world, breathing

in and out. Life so far doesn't have any other name
but breath and light, wind and rain.

If there's a temple, I haven't found it yet.
I simply go on drifting, in the heaven of the grass
and the weeds.