

Amplifying the Charge 1: Who Am I?

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First Parish in Hingham/Old Ship Church

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This is the first of three or perhaps four sermons on whether we want to change the Principles and Purposes of Unitarian Universalism. You can see the present version of the Principles and Purposes if you open your gray hymnal to a page just after the Preface and you will see a page starting with the words “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote...” under this preamble, you will find seven phrases which complete the sentence just started, and under that you will find a list of the sources on which UUs draw for inspiration. In case you’re not as familiar with it as you’d like to be, I will pause at this point to let you re-read it.

[Pause]

This package of words was drafted in 1984 because, 23 years after the Unitarian and the Universalist denominations merged, UUs were still being asked the question, “...but what do you believe in?” But Unitarian and Universalist history shows that both denominations before merger allowed for a lot of room for individual beliefs, and the intention of drafting these words was not to impose a standard by which you could kick somebody out of a church, whether layperson or clergy, but to articulate the values which motivated and guided us.

Many orthodox Christian denominations say a creed every Sunday which goes back to the Council of Nicea in 324 CE. UUs don’t have a denominational creed in this sense, though if you come back in early June, you will see that the teenagers enrolled in the Coming of Age program will favor us with their individual statements of belief.

I grew up as an Episcopalian and I can still remember the words of the Nicene Creed. The word Credo means “I believe” and by reciting the creed one was affirming a belief in those things. They were statements of fact: the virgin birth, the bodily resurrection of Jesus, the life everlasting. These were things the worshipper was affirming a belief in. By contrast, the

Principles and Purposes are in the form of a covenant, We covenant to affirm and promote those values. Take the first Principle, for example, which is the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Worth and dignity are not questions of fact. By covenanting with your fellow UUs across the world, you are not stating that everyone has inherent worth and dignity, you are promising to behave as if they do. It's an ethical statement not an ontological one.

When the Principles and Purposes were approved by the General Assembly in 1984, they came with a stipulation that they would be revisited every so often to see if they needed to be updated. That has happened twice since their enactment and both times the denomination voted to keep them unchanged. But the year 2017 was kind of a watershed in UU history; there was an issue over racial discrimination in hiring for a top leadership position, and the President and a lot of the top leaders resigned. As the issue concerned race, a temporary governing body was formed consisting of three Black leaders, one of whom was the former president and another of whom is our current president.

There was concern that we were not doing enough as an association which claims to be committed to racial equity to do away with what some call structural racism and others call white supremacy culture. Some people responded to this concern by working on an eighth principle devoted solely to racism. At the same time, others noted that the Principles and Purposes were overdue for a general review.

When the original Principles and Purposes were adopted, they were inserted in various pieces of literature, in the hymnal and on the walls of many UU houses of worship, but they were also put into the organization's by-laws, where they are designated as Article II. It isn't legally necessary to put faith statements into the governing documents of a religious organization, but it was kind of poetic that we UUs did so because we consider that both denominations historically are founded on covenant. More about that later.

So the idea of reworking the entire Principles and Purposes had more appeal than adding another principle to address race, so that is what we are doing now. There was a "charge" given by the UUA Board to the study

Commission on Article II, and what we and many of our neighbor UU congregations are doing this spring is to explore a study guide which is supposed to “amplify” this charge.

I’m not always pleased when the denominational headquarters undertakes to draft materials for a worship service, but I was pleased this time, because this congregation is facing many challenges and I think that the exercise of looking at these basic tenets with which we’ve become so familiar over the years may give us all a better vision of what we are doing here.

With that context, I want to start with the suggested theme, “who am I?” In a sense, this is the broadest question we can ever ask about ourselves. It’s so broad almost any answer you give to it will be meaningless until you set a little context and narrow it down. Who am I? What do you mean? Do you want my name, my nationality, my political orientation, my tribe? Do you want my academic standing, what I do for a living, my position in my nuclear family? Do you want my preferred pronouns? My favorite songs or tunes, best recipes, favorite games or TV shows?

The psychologist Erik Erikson in the 1940s came up with a concept which is useful in developmental psychology: identity crisis. An identity crisis can arise when there are changes in our lives and we don’t know exactly who we are anymore; we learn to depend on milestones which tell us who we are, but what happens when there is a change in one’s basic circumstances: going to a different school, or graduating or taking the first job, getting married, living through the separation or divorce of your parents. You form a notion of who you are in one environment and then the environment changes. I can remember when I went from a small private school that my father had helped establish to the public junior high school, which was going from a big fish in a small pond to being a small fish in a bog pond, just as I was physical entering my adolescence.

A person going through an identity crisis might lose some of the milestones which tell us who we are. But is this a surface phenomenon or are we actually turning into different people?

The great Massachusetts poet Stanley Kunitz wrote a poem called “The Layers” which addressed this question:

“I have walked through many lives,
Some of them my own,
And I am not who I once was,
Though some core of being abides
From which I struggle not to stray.”

Is there a core in us which remains constant while other aspects of us change. Is the question “Who Am I?” to be answered differently on different days? Do the changing circumstances of my life change who I am down deep inside?

The Greek philosopher Herakleitos believed that everything changes except change itself; it was he who said you never step into the same river twice, and he might have added that it's not only a different river the second time, but it's a different you. Another great thinker who taught that everything is impermanent was the Buddha. Have you ever watched a Buddhist lama work for three days on a sand mandala only to have him simply dump it over when he is done, to demonstrate its impermanence?

There is a Buddhist doctrine called anatta, the nonself, which holds that there is no permanent self, no permanent you or I, We put on a personality every morning the way we put on clothes, but it is only out of habit. At least theoretically, we could choose to be a different person if we were very mindful about it. And it is the craving and clinging to this delusional self which causes suffering in Buddhism.

So in a sense when a good Buddhist asks the big question we are considering, “Who Am I?” the answer could be “no one,” because there is no self asking the question, no self answering and no self who is the subject of the question.

But that doesn't gibe with Dr. Erikson's identity crisis. I have observed in my 24 years in ministry that we have a big problem in this denomination holding on to young people as they age. Youth and teenagers who have come up through congregational life and gone to Youth Cons and participated in OWL and Coming of Age -- they may love the quality of life that our congregation gave them but now they are off to college. A classic transition, and in Erikson's terms, an occasion for an

identity crisis. Yes if they were so Buddhist that they didn't feel that they had permanent selves, that would be one thing, but in American culture, adolescence is a time when one relies heavily on one's peers to build and sustain identity. Very few of us come up with an answer to "Who Am I?" entirely on our own.

So typically in a UU's biography there will be lost years. My own two children have only been inside UU churches in recent decades if they are attending a service having to do with their father. Many of you have the same experience, I know. I see this as one of our most basic problems and one which does not bode well for the demographics of the future. Which is why I am trying to look at this Article II question not only from a Boomer perspective but from the perspective of younger generations.

Stanley Kunitz continued his poem "The Layers" this way:

When I look behind,
as I am compelled to look
before I can gather strength
to proceed on my journey,
I see the milestones dwindling
toward the horizon
and the slow fires trailing
from the abandoned camp-sites,
over which scavenger angels
wheel on heavy wings.
Oh, I have made myself a tribe
out of my true affections,
and my tribe is scattered!
How shall the heart be reconciled
to its feast of losses?
In a rising wind

the manic dust of my friends,
those who fell along the way,
bitterly stings my face.

It is not only the young who suffer identity crises but the old as well. As we lose friends to illness and death, we old folks wonder who we are, particularly if we have let the social set we belong to define us. We have made a tribe of our true affections.

Now generations have become very important in American culture, largely because the pace of economic and technological change continues to accelerate, so that for all of us the experience of growing up and the ability to adapt to change becomes more challenging with each passing year. If a stable society produces identity crises, how much more does a rapidly changing society do so?

Here's an example from the proposed Article II text. As you may know, the study commission has eliminated the structure of the Principles and Purposes and replaced it with seven values which it presents in a graphic shape. The central value is love and that is at the center of a flower with a flaming chalice representing it and the word Love. The other six values are petals arranged around the center. For each of these, there is a text which amplifies the value.

Let me give you an example: one of the values is Transformation. The amplifying text for this value is as follows:

“We adapt to the changing world.

“We covenant to collectively transform and grow spiritually and ethically. Openness to change is fundamental to our Unitarian and Universalist heritages, never complete and never perfect.”

I really like that “never complete and never perfect.” Many times have I preached on the “blessings of imperfection.” I have also done a lot of thinking and a lot of preaching about evolution in my time in ministry, and I think these few compact lines do a lot to encapsulate the idea of change. We are not only passive recipients of the changing river, but we are also change agents to help bring about the Beloved Community. On earth, in this life, not in some hereafter.

While the structure of the 1984 Principles and Purposes has been altered, there are aspects which echo the old familiar rhetoric. For example, did you notice the word “covenant” in the sentence regarding transformation I just read. The 1984 Principles and Purposes had that word in the preamble so that grammatically it applied to each of the seven principles: “We the member congregations of the UUA do hereby covenant to affirm and promote...” The Commission here has taken out the preamble, but each of the six amplifications sentences commits us to covenant in some way appropriate to the value. Thus the word “covenant” has become like the “action items” on the minutes of a meeting, the things we’re supposed to do and not just talk about doing.

And this usage may be truer to the meaning of covenant than its placement in the 1984 version. I have talked a lot about covenant here. It is an ancient word, going back to the Hebrew Bible. In the book of Genesis, God made several covenants with one or more humans. Our Puritan ancestors modified these divine covenants to make horizontal covenants governing who would be allowed to do what in the new religious communities they were founding. The beloved building in which we meet today is a concrete instantiation of covenant, and I think it’s quite clever and moving that the Study Commission has figured out a way to bring this honorable and ancient word forward into the decades ahead.

Who am I? Who Are we? We are the church without a creed. We are the church which welcomes everyone. We are the church based on covenant, which is always subject to new examination and modification by democratic processes.

I want to close this sermon with the full roll call of the six values and the description of each. Next week we’ll have these in the order of service so that you can compare it with the 1984 version. Remember that Love is at the center.

Interdependence

We honor the interdependent web of all existence. With reverence for the great web of life and with humility, we acknowledge our place in it.

We covenant to protect Earth and all beings from exploitation. We will create and nurture sustainable relationships of care and respect, mutuality and justice. We will work to repair harm and damaged relationships.

Pluralism

We celebrate that we are all sacred beings, diverse in culture, experience, and theology.

We covenant to learn from one another in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We embrace our differences and commonalities with Love, curiosity, and respect.

Justice

We work to be diverse multicultural Beloved Communities where all thrive.

We covenant to dismantle racism and all forms of systemic oppression. We support the use of inclusive democratic processes to make decisions within our congregations, our Association, and society at large.

Transformation

We adapt to the changing world.

We covenant to collectively transform and grow spiritually and ethically. Openness to change is fundamental to our Unitarian and Universalist heritages, never complete and never perfect.

Generosity

We cultivate a spirit of gratitude and hope.

We covenant to freely and compassionately share our faith, presence, and resources. Our generosity connects us to one another in relationships of interdependence and mutuality.

Equity

We declare that every person has the right to flourish with inherent dignity and worthiness.

We covenant to use our time, wisdom, attention, and money to build and sustain fully accessible and inclusive communities.

Amen.