

*“UU Principles – How I see ‘em”*

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How do you accept diversity without it becoming divisive?

The 2005 LARCUM conference met at the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary on Friday, November 4, 2005 in Columbia. LARCUM is an acronym for Lutheran, Anglican, Roman Catholic and United Methodist Bishop’s Dialogue of South Carolina, they have been meeting regularly since 1991

Their topic this year was “In One body through the Cross: the Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity”. The Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity developed over a period of years by people of several Christian traditions. Most participants over the years have been very active in ecumenical work and tend to be well known at the world level. While developing this proposal for Christian unity, however, these theologians were not acting as official representatives for their respective churches.

One of the major questions that came out of this conference is How do you accept diversity without it becoming divisive?

Think about this question – it proposes accepting diversity and creating unity among people with a shared faith – hmmm. Unity among people with a shared with a shared faith -- -- and in that unified group of people there must be a shared value, the search for truth. What an amazing concept. Sound at all familiar?? In my mind, the WOW factor here is very high.

I mentioned this amazing concept to my officemate one day at work. Unity among people with a shared faith. I thought it was wonderful in its familiarity. He did not. He became very agitated very quickly and said ‘one church one god equals the end of the world’! I thought holy cow – hold that thought – sounds like an interesting idea for a future service.

The last time I spoke with you, my topic started out with a look at our own AUUC bylaws and then focused on a particular section dealing with conflict management. Bylaws seem to have an attraction for me, the “rules” if you will that people agree to share and abide by, the walls of their shared world and in this case, our shared world. I think its construction and design of these self-imposed rules or guides that hold the fascination for me. I’ve always questioned the rules and their implied authority. I engage in a methodical deconstruction of said rules. My friend Lorraine described it as militant deconstruction. She said my “blurb” for today’s service was proof of my militant tendencies – UU principles and how they apply to me, how I apply them to you and we apply them to each other! BAM.

True to form, I am back with you today, focusing on bylaws. This time, I am looking at the bylaws of our national organization, the Unitarian Universalist Association; specifically, Article II Section C-2.1.

As I was researching and reading for this service, it slowly occurred to me that within the structure of the UUA and the UU faith and my own UU beliefs, our UUA bylaws are not so much a set of rules that I needed to deconstruct but more a collection of guidelines and promises we make to each other in our shared journeys; especially the section of bylaws known to us as the Principles. I read these aloud earlier. They are familiar, they are life affirming, they demonstrate our religious pluralism. The Rev. Linda Olson Peebles of the UU church of Arlington described them as “shared ways of loving rather than believing.”

I started this morning by asking a question. How do you accept diversity without it becoming divisive? The folks attending the LARCUM conference are asking this question, many other religious groups are asking this same question as they struggle through changes brought by today’s society, and on a more personal level, I hear employers asking it, I hear people asking each other, I hear members of this church asking it as we work our way through this sign process. I find I’m asking myself on occasions – How do I accept diversity without it becoming divisive?

I offer to you and this very diverse group of questioners, the Principles and Sources already established by the UUA. I contend the Unitarian Universalist Principles and the sources of our living tradition are the tools; the basic building blocks needed by humanity to achieve the goal of acceptance of diversity without becoming divided. Sharing a covenant to affirm and promote these few items is the very least we can do. They are, quite literally, a foundation for a loving living tradition. Edward A. Frost published a book called With Purpose and Principle in which he describes the bylaws as the latest in a long history of attempts to state a workable consensus of what brings Unitarian Universalists together.

The members of the LARCUM conference only began meeting 14 years ago – they’re trying to find a way to rebuild after centuries of being divided. Unitarian Universalists have been working toward this goal from their beginnings nearly 2000 years ago.

The journey has been long and difficult. Often, the path of our forbearers meandered, especially during attempts to define shared beliefs for their free churches. They struggled from the beginning to express their beliefs in statements that might create the strength of Unity while preserving the freedom and diversity each movement held precious.

A brief time-line of the journey resulting in the UUA bylaws as we know them:

**1939-1945** - During World War II, the American Unitarian Association created a committee and charged them with developing a basic theological foundation to

support the growth of our movement in all its diversity in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. They came up with 5 principles which were widely accepted:

1. individual freedom of belief; 2. discipleship to advancing truth; 3. the democratic process in human relations; 4. universal brotherhood, undivided by nation, race, or creed; 5. allegiance to the cause of a united world community.

**1959** – Over 1000 Unitarians and Universalists gathered in Syracuse NY to discuss and vote on a 44 page document that had taken three years to write and over sixty years to envision. Seventy-five amendments were offered to the plan. Only one issue caused deadlock and threatened to stop the process – wording of the statement of principles in the proposed UUA bylaws. The principles were amended and filled out to reflect the discussion at the time.

**1961** – The successful merger of Unitarians and Universalists and incorporation of the principles into the association's bylaws.

*Despite this auspicious beginning, and the struggle endured crafting this first set of principles designed to capture the history of two proud religious traditions; it became obvious that further change was necessary. The initial principles were written essentially by straight, white, men, most of whom were ministers. They were filled with patriarchal language and hierarchical assumptions about man and God.*

**1977** – Small group of feminists (4 women in First Parish Church in Lexington Massachusetts) crafted a resolution to seek out the roots of sexism in our movement. This resolution was unanimously adopted by the General Assembly. The resolution referred to the then-existing principles and asked that all UU's examine their religious beliefs and their role in gender stereotyping. It also called upon UU leaders to "put traditional assumptions and language in perspective and to avoid sexist assumptions and language in the future".

**1979** – Conference on Women and Religion called to carry out the mission of the 1977 resolution. Thus the process of rewriting the principles began.

**1980** – The revised principles were distributed among UU Districts and congregations.

**1981** – A revised amendment was sponsored by many districts and the amendment was placed on the agenda of the General Assembly. This amendment was considered very radical and was met with incredible opposition. News outlets at the time reported that Unitarian Universalists were trying to remove God from their bylaws. The 'saving grace' for this amendment was a motion made and passed that sent the proposal to committee for further discussion.

**1982** – The committee created by the 1981 began the discussion of bylaw revisions in earnest.

**1984** – Proposed changes to the Principles were presented for preliminary approval. They consisted of seven principles and five sources.

**1985** – Final approval was given to the amendment changing the UUA bylaws to include the seven principles as we know them today.

**1995** – A sixth source was added from the teachings of Earth centered traditions.

For those of you who notice such things, we happen to be in our 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of our Unitarian Universalist principles!

A couple thousand years in the making, roughly 29 years (1956-1985) in development and discussion, finally adopted in 1985 and tweaked again in 1995. We've taken our time and built a solid foundation. We may not have a common belief as UU's but we do have a set of shared promises and affirmations that have led to some of the most amazing changes in recent years of our movement. Thanks to those 4 women in 1977, changes have led to a new hymn book, a new religious education curriculum, new forms in worship including lighting the chalice and water communion as well as a huge influx of women into the ministry.

The member congregations of the LARCUM conference have an uphill struggle. I believe they could learn a lot from the UU struggle and I believe they could advance their struggle tremendously by accepting and recognizing our UU principles. What a basis for them to work from toward achieving their goal.

Our advantage in today's world is that UU's have accepted that freedom and recognition of the individual is part of our foundation; that it is the experience of the human mind and heart and in the diversity of human minds and hearts that the truth might be found. Many leaders and philosophers of mainstream organized religion say Unitarian Universalists can't survive because we don't have a shared belief system and we are not a religion as Sandra Korbelik stated last week because we do not have a specific contract with God. Sandra reasons we are a faith because we believe that our seven principles and our shared sources will make the world a better place and enrich our personal lives. I believe it has been this faith that has carried our movement all of these years. It is also this faith that helped to articulate these principles we share.

In an article for UU World in 2000, the Rev. Lex Crane suggested that if we view our principles as an integrated whole, as we might view a poem, a remarkable thematic symmetry and resonance emerges. The principles embrace the entire range of human experience: the principles embrace the entire range of human experience: the individual person, relations between societies in a world community of nations, and relations of both within the interdependent web of all existence. The lifelong search for

truth and meaning lies at the midpoint of the seven principles, between the individual person and interdependence, suggesting that the search is a central value in our lives and that it must take place in the tension between our affirmation of the worth of the individual person and our recognition of the high importance of the interdependent web of which each of us is a part.

How do you accept diversity without it becoming divisive? I say you look to our UU principles and revel in the foundation they present. From here, I believe you can go anywhere. When you start the journey with a promise to each other of mutual trust and support, I believe you give yourself the ability to achieve anything. Rather than adhering to the faulty yet widely popular statement that UU's can believe anything, I will share with you the words of another unidentified believer (unidentified because in my research I made note of the words and lost the identify of the writer!) we are a faith movement grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennoblees our faith and we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision.