

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Silver City

Sunday September 14, 2003

**"Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes:
The Fifth Principle"**

Presenter: The Rev. Rabiya Lila Forest

Moderator: Barbara Gabioud

OPENING MUSIC

WELCOME

Barbara

OPENING WORDS/CHALICE LIGHTING

Rabiya

We kindle this light as a symbol of the sacred right of conscience and the aspiration we share toward a process that honors and includes everyone.

JOYS AND CONCERNS

Barbara

SINGING THE CHILDREN OUT "Go Now In Peace"

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Barbara

OFFERING Music: Bach's Air on the G String

READING from John Milton

Rabiya

**Our faith and knowledge thrive by exercise, as well as our limbs and complexion.
If the waters of truth flow not in a perpetual progression, they sicken into a muddy
pool of conformity and tradition.**

**The light which we have gained was given us not to be ever staring on, but by it to
discover onward things more remote from our knowledge.**

**Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, much
writing, many opinions.**

**Give me liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience,
above all liberties.**

And though all the winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth, so truth be in the field, we do injuriously to misdoubt her strength.

For who knows not that truth is strong, next to the Almighty; she needs no policies, no stratagems, to make her victorious.

Let her and falsehood grapple, whoever knew truth put to the worse in a free and open encounter?

SONG "One More Step" #168

In this series of reflections on the Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes, we move on today to the fifth principle. Since we have had a bit of a hiatus between the last principle and this one, let us recall to mind the first four:

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:

The inherent worth and dignity of every person;

Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;

Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;

A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;

And now, we take up consideration of the fifth principle, which is this: "We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large."

In a certain sense, this principle is directly connected to all of the preceding ones, and the third and fourth ones in particular. The right of conscience and the use of democratic process are certainly deeply connected to acceptance of one another, and also to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

I see us offered some challenges by these ideas: the first one I would like to explore is this: how do we accept each other and honor and use democratic process when the values we hold according to our individual consciences are different? Can we remember to honor the inherent worth and dignity of a fellow member of our congregation when the right of conscience leads us to differing conclusions? There are certain assumptions I find herein. First, each of us has the right to hold and to express the values and ideas that conscience brings us to, even when they are

different from those of others in our community. Each of us has the responsibility to keep our hearts and minds open to each when these values and ideas differ. And as a group, we have the responsibility to work together with democratic process when our differing values urge us to different actions and positions.

For me, this issue has emerged a couple of times this year in the life of this congregation. When we were exploring the issue of acceptance of each other, the idea arose during discussion during and after the service, that perhaps we needed to come together and share with each other when we feel accepted in our congregation and when we don't, as a way of seeing a kind of collective portrait of how are with each other and what we carry, silently or not, as a result of that. And, it was suggested, why not invite people who were previously a part of this community, who might like to rejoin us, to also participate in this process? I think this would be a rich and valuable experience in our life as a congregation and as a community, so I propose to facilitate such a process in the October service for which I'm scheduled. I invite further discussion on this at the end of this reflection.

The second occasion at which this issue arose for me was at the time of the Fourth of July parade. Questions were raised: should we march with the Peace Coalition? Should we march with our UUFSC banner with PFLAG, Parents and Friends of Gays and Lesbians? As far as my fairly unreliable memory serves, it was decided that it was fine to march with PFLAG, since support for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people is so integral a part of the culture of our denomination, based on the first principle of the inherent worth and dignity of every person. The same question arose within the newly-re-formed chapter of the ACLU on the same occasion, with regard to marching with the Peace Coalition. The decision there was not to carry the ACLU banner in that group, but that any persons so desiring were encouraged to march as individuals. The reasoning there was that one might

be a supporter and promoter of civil liberties and yet not agree with a particular stance on war or peace.

And further back in the history of this fellowship, a decision was made that the Social Justice committee of the group could take a stand on any given issue, but could not speak for the Fellowship as a whole.

From my point of view, there are no easy answers here. When an occasion arises involving a potential public stand or statement being made, there should either be an agreed-upon policy in place already to cover the situation, or dialogue on that particular occasion should take place. Is consensus easy in such an instance? Not likely. And is a simple vote of numbers sufficient to decide the issue? More about that later, when we take up the idea of democratic process.

It is common, as I have mentioned before, for most UU congregations to have a small number of members who are religious liberals and social and/or political conservatives. Since the majority consider themselves liberals in all these arenas, they forget or cannot understand how this divergence could be. And in some cases, what results is a tyranny of the majority.

I think it is absolutely essential that we all uphold, promote, encourage, and support the right of conscience of each individual in our congregation and also the right to express that conscience without fear of alienation or rejection. This means that liberals and conservatives have a responsibility to make space for each other's expressions, and to maintain respect and openness to each other as persons, even though ideas and opinions may be rejected. There must not be tyranny, whether of the majority or the minority.

I feel that there is another responsibility, deeper and more private in scope, that we have as individual Unitarian Universalists. And this relates to the principle that upholds the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We need to examine and understand the relationships between our UU values and the opinions and values we hold in the various areas of human life and thought. The responsible search for truth calls upon us to continually question our own beliefs and understandings in the light of our core principles, whether we consider ourselves to be progressive, liberal, conservative, libertarian, radical, or whatever.

Our UU Principles serve a far deeper purpose than the traditional creeds of some Christian denominations. Those creeds are an affirmation of what their adherents have faith in, primarily in the realm of religious belief. They do not address issues of being a human person on this earth and how one's faith informs human life. The UU Principles are also a statement of faith: faith in the values we as a faith community aspire to. So they offer us this unique opportunity to periodically examine our conscience in the light of our values. This is a great gift, for which we must be grateful. It is a condition which we must celebrate with thankfulness.

A word about democratic process. Most if not all of us have grown up and been educated in the United States, where a very high value is placed upon democracy, and rightly so: coming out of old traditions of the right of kings, this nation created a whole new pattern for the organization of collective life, based upon democratic principles. One person, one vote (although it didn't start out that way) is a radical improvement on the kingly pronouncement "l'etat c'est moi".

But we are in an age where the evolution of democratic process is taking us into new territory, that of consensus. The processes and skills required to live by consensus rather than democratic voting are more subtle and more demanding. Primary on the list of skills is compassionate listening, a skill which has its

foundation on our first UU principle of the inherent worth of every person. Good consensus process also requires patience and persistence: the willingness to hang in with the process even when it's gone too long. Breaks are allowed! How often when involved in a seemingly tedious consensus process does a voice arise within saying "Let's get on with it. Let's just vote and get it over with!" But if we succumb to that voice, we lost an opportunity to discover a greater truth, a greater wisdom, that arises from the needs and understanding of the group as a whole. I have witnessed this emergence happening again and again in my experiences in community. And every time it happens, it is an epiphany and a cause for hope in the future of humanity and for celebration.

This fifth principle calls upon us to promote the use of democratic process in our societies. I think this also bears some examination. What are "our societies"? There are on this planet some societies, notably ones that are tribal in nature, in which a quite different process of arriving at truth and wisdom is the norm. Take for example the ideals of the council fire of some Native American peoples. All are welcome to express their opinions (although young ones are encouraged to listen long and hard before they ever begin to speak), but some people's opinions carry more weight than others'. Their wisdom, drawn from life experience and perhaps from intuition and connection with Spirit, is recognized and valued by the whole community. These are the ones who are chosen for leadership because of their character, their experience, and their compassion. These are societies in which collective values are much stronger than individual ones, and the process of decision-making is more collective and less individualistic.

So when the United States as a major power in the global arena seeks to impose democratic values and processes on cultures which are more tribal in nature, we had best beware that we are imposing alien ideas that might actually be harmful to the fabric of those cultures.

Laurens Van Der Post, in his evocative and fascinating novel “A Story Like the Wind”, set in the time of transition from colonialism to independence in Africa, touches on this issue. He describes how a mandate for democratic-style voting for a new national leader is imposed on Rhodesia by western powers, and how alien this is from the council fire process for the tribes involved, who are used to sitting together to arrive at decisions and choices, and what a degradation of their collective native wisdom this imposition creates. Context is everything, and this we must be aware of as we seek to apply our principles in the world.

(Discussion)

SONG “With Heart and Mind” #300

CLOSING WORDS/CHALICE EXTINGUISHING

Rabiya

As we extinguish this flame, let us carry with us a commitment to walk our talk by keeping conscience aligned with our principles.