

THINGS COMMONLY BELIEVED AMONG US?

**a sermon by Rev. Preston Moore
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CHALICE LIGHTING AND CALL TO WORSHIP

We light this chalice flame mindful that it is a symbol, an ancient, sacred, visible symbol of our innermost thoughts and feelings, inspiring us to contemplation here in our place of worship. And as we light the flame, we recite these words, mindful that words, too, are symbols, audible symbols of our innermost experiences and convictions, inspiring us to action in the world outside. May the words we choose be as vibrant and pure and gemlike as this flame.

The lighting of the chalice, and the words that accompany it, are part of our unvarying tradition. Like the flame, the words are fresh and new for each service. But there are other words, as well, that we recite from time to time, and that do not change from one Sunday to another. They include our Covenant, our Mission Statement, and the UU Principles and Purposes -- our own versions of creeds, to borrow a term from former UUA President Paul Carnes.

But do the exact words really matter very much? Is it not true that symbols are much less important than the things they stand for? Shouldn't we rather heed the admonition of another UUA President, the Rev. John Buehrens who preached on our own Charter Day sermon almost nineteen years ago (I need to check), and who once said: "The important thing about religious living is not what we profess with our lips but how we witness with our lives"?

Nevertheless, all of us have had the experience, at one time or another in our lives, of worrying about wording, of painstaking wordsmithing, of crafting language to fit our thoughts and feelings. We have all known occasions when words mattered very much indeed. Does reciting a creed count among such experiences? Do the words matter? And if it matters what we "profess with our lips" in our church, how exactly does it matter in our everyday lives?

Come, let us worship together.

SERMON

"Crystal Clear" is an internet columnist. She describes herself as "pro-life." She is a big fan of President Bush but thinks he is too liberal on immigration. She has a list of questions she asks of men who wish to date her – questions to which they must give the right answer in order to be eligible.

To Crystal Clear, many things are "crystal clear." Like turning off life support systems in the case of patients determined by doctors and the courts to be in a persistent vegetative state,

with no hope of recovery. Her word for this is “murder,” -- a label also used by the Roman Catholic Church.

You may be wondering how I found my way to Crystal. You may also wonder why I kept reading far enough to learn this much about her. I found the image you see on today’s order of service on the internet, with a link to the website it came from. I clicked on that link, and there she was. Crystal Clear, you see, is a Unitarian Universalist. She is a big fan of the UU Principles and Purposes.

I don’t want to ridicule this person’s views, some of which, on some subjects, might even be instructive. Reading about her, though, I did wonder how far she and I would get with mutual spiritual exploration in a covenant group. Or participating together in a congregational forum about the basic direction of our Social Justice Cluster. And I wondered what it said about our Principles and Purposes that people whose values are as different as Crystal’s and mine can be flying the same flag, so to speak.

The Unitarian Universalist Association has chosen revision of the Principles and Purposes as its current study topic. I am not particularly interested in the finer points of any such revisions. I am keenly interested, though, in asking, what difference does a statement of religious values make in our lives? What purpose should it serve, and are our Principles and Purposes doing that? And if not, what can we do about it?

In the call to worship, Hans shared with you John Buehrens’ declaration that “the important thing about religious living is not what we profess with our lips but how we witness with our lives.” Certainly our witnessing with our lives is very important, but what how should we share the way we live with one another, and with those beyond our walls? Should we say, “just follow us around for a few years with a notepad observing how we witness with our lives, and then you’ll know.” I mean, we’re very interesting people; but are we THAT interesting?

We do need to profess with our lips. Statements of values are openings through which we can enter into deeper spiritual conversation and engagement -- the very essence of why we exist as a church. They are how we hold one another, and the world beyond our walls, accountable to what we collectively declare to be of utmost importance.

In the introduction to our Principles and Purposes, it says “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote” the listed values. If you join a church knowing that it has made covenants with an association of other churches, then, in effect, you have adopted those covenants as your own. In effect, each Unitarian Universalist has given all the others permission to hold him accountable for applying these values.

As a means of holding us accountable and opening us to deeper spiritual conversation, how well do our principles and purposes serve us? Our national leaders have expressed serious reservations about this. One has said “they describe a process for approaching the religious depths but they testify to no intimate acquaintance with the depths themselves.” Another asks “how many of us would, on our death bed, ask to have the Principles and Purposes read to us for

solace and support?” Our current UUA President, Bill Sinkford, has noted the absence of “even one word that would be considered traditionally religious” in the Principles and Purposes and wonders “whether this kind of language can adequately capture who we are and what we’re about.”

I find nothing objectionable in our Principles and Purposes, nothing I would hesitate to affirm and promote. My problem is that I can’t think of very many people -- religious or nonreligious -- who would feel differently – not even the most diehard materialists, who reject the very idea of spirituality. Not even . . . Crystal Clear. The Principles and Purposes do identify various religions and spiritualities as “sources of our living tradition,” but thus far none has proven to be a sufficiently important source to contribute even one specifically religious value to our statement of values.

A statement of values can’t really call itself religious without addressing a few basic religious questions. Toward what is our spiritual questing pointed? What jeopardizes our spiritual well-being, so that we are moved to find what can save us from that jeopardy? What wounds us spiritually, and how can we be healed? What is the nature of our spiritual fallibility and what can we do about it? What is sacred to us, in the sense of having the power to move us toward the holy? Or is nothing sacred?

I don’t expect, or even long for, crystal clear answers to these questions, or tidy step-by-step recipes for transformative spiritual practices. I do hope, though, that we can get on with the work of arriving at some things commonly believed among us about such questions – the kinds of things that can serve as those all-important openings into the greater spiritual depth so many of you have said you long for.

The way to get on with this work is not to head out on a safari with Noah Webster, beating the bushes for new words. We’ve been doing that for nearly a century and a half, and our best wordsmithing is what has brought us to where we are today. Instead, we should look back and ask ourselves how values are best cultivated, and what may not have worked well in the way our own values statements have been arrived at.

I believe a religious community can best come to such statements gradually and organically. The best way to begin is from the bottom up, with the sharing of spiritual experiences in small groups, in local congregations. When these have fermented long enough, they add up to a refined tradition of community stories, practices, and wisdom. They become a place where those great ideas on horseback and long-haired virtues in embroidered gowns we heard about in this morning’s poetry -- values like constancy, reason, justice, valor, and forgiveness -- can reside, informing our lives and lifting us up out of the merely material.

Thus ripened, the tradition can be formalized, beginning a cycle of moving from experience to formality and back, each feeding and refining the other. The tradition then can be shaped by new blood in the community and new understandings, carefully sorting out what is worth keeping from what should be left behind.

Experience and formal declarations of values do feed and refine each other, but experience has to be the place to start. Religion should begin with "body wisdom" -- the stirrings of the Deep Self manifested through feeling into consciousness. The task of good minds is to listen for these stirrings and then translate them into values for ordering our lives. The Jewish people did not write the Bible as a values guide and then constitute themselves as a spiritual community. They lived their religion and accumulated wisdom piecemeal, as it was revealed to them. In our own very different way, so must we.

But to be honest, we haven't. Not so far. In its 2005 report on theological unity, the UUA reported, after much review of our history and surveying of current congregational life, that in most UU churches, communing about deep spiritual issues is uncommon. Our periodic conferences on statements of values have had more the quality of an arms-length negotiation than a poetic formalization of what had already been arrived at organically, over time.

Describing the art of negotiation, a famous diplomat once said, a good deal is defined as one that is barely acceptable to all sides. This may be shrewd diplomacy, but it is not healthy spiritual development. At best, our negotiations and renegotiations have led to thin compromises stitched together after difficult discussions. Small wonder, then, that these conferences have been followed by long periods of theological slumber. No one wanted to get into a deep dialogue that might awaken the sleeping dogs of disagreement.

There are encouraging exceptions to this generalization, including right here in our own church. Last year, in a number of meetings and worship services, we opened ourselves to the subject of being welcoming to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. We are now credentialed by the UUA as a Welcoming Congregation, and our work goes on. It is of a piece with what our religious movement has done over a period of decades, patiently attending to the accretion of experience and wisdom into a tradition. We have come further faster on the matter of loving people without regard to sexual orientation than any other church. This exception validates the general principle: the way to have statements of values that are authentic and affecting is to develop them as an outgrowth of tradition, accumulated from the bottom up.

We should be neither surprised nor dismayed by our history of difficulty with values statements, which need not hold us back. Many UUs are particularly at home in the domain of language arts -- members of what I would call "the explaining classes." Teachers, scientists, lawyers, psychologists, and the like, with a strong tendency to favor reason over emotion. It is natural that we would be tempted to move directly to what should be the last stage in such a process: working with language to formalize the traditions. But with practice we can resist that temptation.

We also tend to be self-reliant and a little bit hyperconscientious--big believers that anything worth doing is worth doing well; and conversely, maybe a little sensitive about not doing something well -- particularly in the presence of others. But with a little practice, we can embrace the truth that in the domain of religion, many things worth doing are important enough to do badly, rather than not at all. Ironically, some of the most valuable contributions in religion are about sharing what troubles us, which is often awkward and certainly not about turning in a stellar performance.

We also have a noble tradition of individualism, characterized by a wariness that if a religious community binds too tightly, it will suffocate individuality. The linguistic, individualistic, and hyperconscientious strands in our collective temperament are virtues. We should ask ourselves, though, whether these virtues have been carried so far that they are hindering the deepening of our spirituality, which can only be achieved in community rather than in isolation, and with more attention on our emotions than our reason.

Incidentally, if you are a visitor today, you may be wondering if it is customary for us to be this self-critical. It is. Our fourth principle upholds the value of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We are unsparing in that search, and we do not hesitate to focus our most searching faculties on ourselves. And if you are wondering why I became a Unitarian Universalist minister in the face of the challenges I am describing this morning, the explanation is very simple. The challenges facing UUs are my challenges too: getting out of my head, listening to my emotions, dialing down my intense individualism. So this really is where I belong.

The last obstacle that has stood between us and an organically cultivated tradition of spiritual depth is fear, pure and simple. Listen to what the poet M. Truman Cooper has to say on that subject:

Suppose that what you fear
Could be trapped,
And held in Paris.
Then you would have
The courage to go
Anywhere in the world.
All the directions of the compass
Open to you,
Except the degrees east or west
Of true north
That lead to Paris.
Still, you wouldn't dare
Put your toes
Smack dab on the city limit line.
You're not really willing
To stand on a mountainside
Miles away
And watch the Paris lights
Come up at night.
Just to be on the safe side,
You decide to stay completely
Out of France.
But then danger
Seems too close
Even to those boundaries,

And you feel
The timid part of you
Covering the whole globe again.
You need the kind of friend
Who learns your secret and says
“See Paris first.”

Many of us came to Unitarian Universalism as refugees from churches with thick theologies twisted into very dogmatic shapes by centuries of institutional sclerosis. So naturally we think of dogma and doctrine as our “Paris.” I have to pause here to acknowledge an awkwardness in this image for at least one of us. Hans lives in Paris for a considerable part of the year, and although he is a conscientious and loyal worship associate, it may be asking a big much to expect him to accept Paris as the repository for his fears.

In any event, to stay with the poet’s interesting metaphor, the more intense the dogmatic noise level emanating from Paris, the further away some of us are determined to retreat. We may resist even a flexible tradition, composed of things commonly believed among us, that is dynamic enough for variations in individual understanding, provisional enough to let us grow and reconsider our values over time, yet definite enough to provide an opening for a shared descent into the spiritual depths.

I wonder whether the fear lurking beneath our conscious fear of dogmatism isn’t perhaps a fear of that descent into the spiritual depths itself. Beneath the surface of Paris there are extensive catacombs. In the dark and stillness of deep places, who knows what voices one might hear, or to what new and unsettling path those voices might call us? But we do know, or should know, what awaits us if we stay as far away from Paris as we can get, sitting in the safety of bloodless, innocuous statements of values that will lead only to the way of empty generality, of chronic anxiety over why we are here on this earth and why we are in church.

The medieval theologian and mystic Meister Eckhart once said “God is at home. We are in the far country.” Our fear has driven us from our native land. The route home passes through the Paris catacombs. The only way to transcend the anxiety, to rise above it, is to go below.

What can we do right here to move forward on that journey? We can have a wide-open conversation about why we don’t talk with each other very much about our spiritual lives, and how to begin doing that.

Our Adult Lifespan Faith Development Committee saw the need for this at our meeting last week. The UUA encourages congregations to hold workshops and give input on its Principles and Purposes study. The workshop materials, though, focus on the particulars of possible revised wordings. Our Committee saw – honestly, they saw this more clearly than I did – that a different kind of process would be more beneficial, starting with a forum on talking about theology. Talk that involves not abstraction and pure intellect, but rather, the theology embedded in our daily lives, our emotional struggles.

So on October 21 and 28, we will have such a forum, in two sessions. The Committee has playfully named it “What? Theology?” Details on this and other new adult LFD programs will be forthcoming through the usual media by September 16. We also can continue to reflect on where our collective spiritual journey should be pointing. We will do that on December 2, in a worship service entitled “Journey to the Center of the Faith.”

Part of the organic process of developing traditions involves telling stories. Of our own story, UU historian David Robinson has said, “Like a pauper who searches for the next meal, never knowing of the relatives whose will would make him rich, American Unitarians lament their vague religious identity, standing upon the richest theological legacy of any American denomination.” To begin to recover this story, we are offering an adult LFD program on Unitarian Universalist history in November.

Relatedly, on Founder’s Day, February 3, our worship service will focus on the theme of tradition, including how to cultivate it without getting stuck in it, as so many other churches seem to have done. On February 10, the subject of our spiritual journey will surface again, this time from the perspective of how we integrate our prized values of individualism and community. On February 24, we will return to these themes in a worship service focusing on the spiritual importance of story and metaphor.

The single most important path toward closer spiritual engagement is the small group ministry program getting under way this month. Churches everywhere have realized that this form of ministry is essential for people to feel safe in opening up. Some of you have asked about the topics for interaction within particular group and have wondered whether you will be well matched with some of them. Please keep your eyes on the real prize here, which is not to have yet another stimulating intellectual discussion. The topic is only a way in. Groups are forming now. You can contact Sara Mackey to register. Jennifer and I are also available to speak with you about small group ministry.

In these and other ways, this year we’re going to have an adult version of that Passport to Adventure program the children did over the summer – but with just one foreign destination: Paris. The catacombs. So bring your spelunking gear.

Unitarian Universalists are a religious movement of painfully high spiritual aspirations. We won’t settle for canned doctrines handed down by from on high. We will not practice religion by rote, like mice scuffling forth from their mouse holes to squeak out a dutiful hymn of praise. We are determined to be the authors of our own lives and our own spirituality. And we will not turn away from the messy complexities of these aspirations. We will not pretend that in matters of religion, things can ever be “crystal clear.” True enough, we must have words to live by. But John Buehrens was onto something when he emphasized the importance of how we witness with our lives. First the living witnessing, then the wording, and all will be well.

Amen.

