

One Is The Start Of It All - John Freund

As delivered to First Unitarian Society of Westchester (13nov2022)

1. Sperm-n-Egg

A quote from Orson Welles:

"We're born alone, we live alone, we die alone".

Orson Welles, ladies and gentlemen: Great auteur. Miserable motivational speaker.

While it's true that some of us may die alone, nobody exactly lives alone, I can with confidence say that no one is born alone. It took at least two people communing to make you, more if technology was involved. And your first 9 months of existence was a part of something larger than yourself: The warm, dark, gurgling sea that was your mom. Unbeknownst to you, you were a community of two.

And then, came the worst thing that ever happened to you: You were born.

My sister - like so many other babies - came into the world screaming. She'd come to the horrifying realization there was this part of her that was never a part of her. And now it's missing, replaced by this cold, vast, brilliant void.

As the nurse wrapped-up Kristin up gave her to my mother, Mom got her first real look at her fitful daughter and said, "Oh, look at you!" And Kristin immediately stopped crying. And her eyes got huge, and she seemed to be trying to turn her head to find that voice that she knew so well.

It was in that moment, that Kristin, like all of us, was instilled with the need for community—to find our place in our family, our town, and the world.

2. Not submission but submittal - It takes a band to have a gig

RELIGIOUS community is what brings us here. And I say; "Shudder not to use the word Religion." I used to shudder, too; but as my musical community became my spiritual community, I gained a more principled understanding of the word.

As a musician I used to practice "religiously". Then I joined my fellow musicians, leading worship to the gods of music - James Brown, Led Zeppelin, The Beatles, Joni Mitchell, Funkadelic. I kept the covenant of gigging: Learn the material, be on time, play to the song, listen, keep your antennas up,

find your role in the community, and keep covenant. And "pick-up" gigs were the real practicum for the dynamics of human covenant. These were one-off gigs with ad-hoc bands where some people knew each other, but sometimes I was recommended 3rd-hand and knew nobody. This was truly where I learned how to use covenant to find my place; to follow - and in doing so, learn how to lead.

To be "religious" about anything is to develop a set of practices that help the practitioner to be at their best, while developing the confidence to challenge others to do the same. Share ideas to develop a covenant that we then practice and refine over time. Religion is not a place where ideas go to die.

And it is not a submission to an authority. It is a submittal to the community, because the community is the greater good and each has a contribution to make to that. Yeah, I practiced my instrument by myself, but - I **submit to you** that it only developed meaning when I shared music with others. Religious community is where I take steps on my spiritual journey with you.

Breakdown the word "community" into it's Latin elements and it simply means sharing together.

Unitarian Universalism, has the idea of community built right into its name:

- Unitarian: Everything can be seen together as one living thing... Unitarian.
- Universalism: Every being and particle has a place in and is in relationship, and as such is worthy of it's existence. None shall be cast out and all will be recycled into something else... Universalism.

It is about "The Intimacy between individual beings" within "The Ultimacy of The Everything."

One in the context of all. Community.

3. World Community - Republican'ts and Libtards still have stand together in line at the grocery and wait their turn

We promote a healthy respect for the individual spiritual path and do not force a specific dogma. I wouldn't want to be forced to play one instrument or one genre of music, either. So instead of religious *law*, we rely on principle: a vector that points in a direction.

A principle itself might be immutable, yet the words we choose to describe it must be re-examined periodically to keep our description relevant and meaningful.

As you may have guessed, I have been examining the sixth of our Unitarian Universalist Principles - "The Goal of World Community; with Peace, Liberty and Justice for all." This is the loftiest of the principles, because let's face it, it kind of falls into the category of, "Great idea, but, good luck with that." The loftiness is right there in the first half: "A *Goal* of World Community." Yet, a goal is something that we aspire to, because we don't have it.

So, why is this part of the principle an aspiration? It should be an acknowledgement; like: "The inherent worth and dignity of every person". Not aspirational. That's unequivocal. And equally unequivocal is the fact that we already *have* World Community. We are in community with Democrats and Republicans and men and women and folx and children and gay people and straight people and asexual/aromantic people...and Buddhists and Sufis and Quakers and atheists and the Canadians and the French and French Canadians, everyone on Facebook... and Jesus.

John Oliver once said, to comedic effect, "I think everyone has a relationship with Jesus whether they like it or not."

And he's right. Whether you think of Jesus as a myth or man, his story has affected us. So Jesus, Putin, Bigfoot, and each of us is part of our history, present, and our future. We are in community whether we like it or not. We don't need a goal of community, we need a commitment to covenant to make what we already have work better. And that's what the second part of the principle is about. That's the aspirational part.

I'm grateful to the people who put our principles forward; but I **submit** to you that we amend THIS principle to read something like this:

"Embrace World Community, with the **Goal** of Peace, Liberty and Justice for all";
...because we still have a way's to go for that.

4. One is the start of it all - but it's never finished

And one is the start of it all. If that seems overwhelming - say it with me: "Shudder not." While we do have to accept that we cannot force our individual will upon culture, the accumulation of our tortured writhing can throw culture off balance just enough for it to change course; and our shouting voices are the conscience that keeps culture awake at night.

Did you ever read Richard Bach's **Illusions**? There's a line in it that says, "Argue for your limitations, and sure enough, they are yours." It's that way with our differences. We work so hard to divide our

country into Conservatives, and Liberals instead of setting about the real work of manifesting the second part of The Sixth Principle. And it's that goal of peace, liberty, and justice that needs the good faith effort of all worthy and dignified individuals to commit to it.

- Liberty—the right of individual autonomy
- Justice—the balancing of individual rights, to maintain the integrity of the community
- Peace—the result of successful integration of liberty and justice

The reason we haven't yet attained this goal is because those three things can't seem to exist in the same place. Liberty and justice:

- “I have a justifiable right to defend myself.”
- “I have a justifiable right not be shot.”
- So if you want to talk about a peace dividend, don't expect a 1099-INT to be issued for that.

5. Taking responsibility to advocate for a greater mutual good

When I give this sermon I usually use the Time for all Ages to tell the story of the Tickling River.

Cliff Notes version:

An African folktale of two tribes in a border dispute, and are each plotting to cross the Tickling River in the middle of the night to launch a surprise attack on the other. But as they both silently wade through the moonlight into the river, they find out why it's called the Tickling River, and soon are all falling over each other in fits of uncontrollable laughter and lose interest in their attack, and instead work out their differences and live in peace.

Yeah. If only.

Emotions are rough. We can't blame ourselves for our personal emotions, attitudes and prejudices—they form far below our consciousness. But we can't afford to deny them either. Each must acknowledge their own, and take personal responsibility for actions made in response to them.

Which is why I'm confused—we can't accept a world community, yet it's quite acceptable to blame the same world community for its current state by saying, “Oh that's just the way of the world”; as if culture were something completely outside us, and unaffected by us. You know, “Climate change is nature just doing it's thing.”

An acquaintance once said to me, “The idea that anything manmade is not natural, is ridiculous. We are part of nature.”

And *he's* right. Nature has given us an ability to consider and extrapolate and abstract; to think ahead. And so, I must consider that I am in community with people I will never meet. Which means—if I may extrapolate an abstraction of the future—what I need to do is be a better neighbor to people who won't exist until long after I am dead.

And, THAT means not blaming racism on people who've been dead for decades by saying, "I didn't start slavery or Jim Crow." We have to accept responsibility for the difficult realities others have left to us. It is the Scarlett O'Hara attitude of "I'll think about that tomorrow" that will have the generations of tomorrow dealing with the same things we are today.

As for Jesus, he is not going to pick us up and carry us across the sand in tough times. You know what I think he really said about that one set of footprints?

"I've been telling you to love each other as you love me for 2000 years. I got nothing new for you. So, I decided that y'all's gonna step-up and make it happen on your own this time."

And HE's right, too. WE have a role to fill.

6. Whatsoever we do

And we do have an effect. Often, when I do this service, I put a couple congregants up to causing some kind of ruckus at this point and I call them out by very sharply; saying, "...and I really would appreciate it if the two of YOU would have the courtesy to be quiet while I'm up here speaking!!"

You can imagine the ripple *that* sends. Then I pause and say, "Did you feel that? I just changed the tone of this room in one sentence. You may think that they deserved that, (they didn't, I put them up to it). But even if they deserve to be called out, my reaction wasn't the right way to deal it. That act just radiated throughout the congregation."

And if it's that easy to radiate negativity... it's just that easy to radiate positivity.

7. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder of my arm

Early in 1990, I was passing through Port Authority, and saw a presumably homeless woman sitting over by the main door with all her stuff.

When she caught my glance, her eyes widened and she immediately got up, left all her stuff (which you just don't do) and set a course to cut me off at the exit. I was late and had been having a bad time of things in general and I clenched my jaw and muttered to myself, "I don't have time for this" and quickened my pace.

But...she caught me before I got to the door. She put her hand on my arm and looked directly and I'll say "lovingly" into my eyes, and said, "Your birthmark is soooo beautiful." And she turned around and walked back to her stuff, which no one had taken, thank goodness. She asked for nothing.

Not only, did she make my day, she shook me to my core. Because for the 26 years that I lived, I had suffered in some respect with other people's inability to deal with my birthmark. 30 seconds before meeting this woman, I was a self-centered jerk; a Community-of-One.

30 seconds AFTER meeting this woman... I was a changed man. And in a very real way, she changed everyone with whom I came in contact thereafter. And I include you.

We have a direct affect on those around us. Affording peace, liberty, and justice for all in the World, is not about trying to change the world. One person has the liberty - the autonomy - to do some-thing that can radiate a sense of love, and lead to justice and peace.

8. Who needs a Golden Rule when stainless steel is more practical?

Remember the Golden Rule? Yeah? Ok, forget the golden rule.

Because every time we talk about the Golden Rule we get hung up on the language: Should it be, "Do unto others as you would have done unto you" or "as they would prefer to be done unto them" or blah blah blah.

I've already rewritten one OUR principles this morning so... I'm going for the Brass Ring and take a stab at rewriting the foundational principle of all religions and ethical systems — The Golden Rule. Ready?

It's really very simple. Four words:

>> Don't. Be. A. Jerk.

That's a pretty low bar. But since we get hung-up on impossibly high goals, how about we practice a principle that we can all handle. Just imagine, imagine if everyone at least said to themselves a couple times a day, "Don't be a jerk."

You don't have to give me a life-changing compliment. You don't have to be my best friend. You don't even have to let me ride your bike. Just don't let the door smack me in face after you go through it.

I know it's really hard to fill the world with the radiance of my good will. And if I tried to do that on a pick-up gig, I'd play too much and get fired after the first set. If we don't understand what to do, then at very least leave a vacuum that can be filled by someone else's good will, and let that radiate.

9. Respect for Differences - Sowing Liberty and Justice

This is what we call Respect. Respect is not admiration, but an acknowledgement of difference. Again, Universalism is about our respective roles in existence. Actions have consequences. If I act without respect for my role, it's quite possible that I'm going to do some damage.

Remember George Zimmerman and Trayvon Martin? This incident made the news due to it's racial currency, but the most important takeaway is this: George did not understand that he was a Neighborhood Watchman, and not a law enforcement official. He was told by police dispatch not follow Trayvon. George did. George had a gun. Trayvon ended up shot dead by that gun. Grave consequences because George did not respect the role of expertise.

For one reason or another, I've had a microphone in front of my face for most of my life. For various reasons, believe it or not, I've struggled with stage fright for most of my life.

Very simply put, my stage fright was because I was deluded about my role in performance - I didn't respect the mic. I was writing good music because I felt the presence to write music. But when was performing it, I was doing it for the applause. I wasn't present.

The audience was not there to pat my ego. My role in that community was to submit my music to THEM. To communicate with THEM. Not the other way around. I started singing directly to them, and worked myself back into covenant.

Respect the microphone. It gives you the power to affect the lives of **many people** within a moment. That should cause anyone anxiety.

There are two kinds of people who are comfortable in front of a microphone:

1. Those who understand that power can serve themselves, yet wield that power responsibly
2. Those who understand that power can serve themselves

Social media has given us all a microphone; and exercising that power has had grave consequences. I have a degree in Electronic Media Communications. I'm being strident because I know what I'm talking about here.

If you think I'm about to discuss "He who shall not be named", he is just but ONE example of microphone abuse, albeit a big one. Yet, his rise is a symptom of OUR inability to respect the mic, regardless of our political leanings.

Do not blame the media for this as a way to absolve ourselves. WE are the media now, and we are accountable. Trash-talk is not holding covenant, yet it's admittedly something humans need to engage in sporadically. BUT - It is one thing to sit around a table with a couple friends and do this. It's another to blast it out to several hundred people because we have a few minutes while sitting on the toilet, and need the endorphin hit.

That is not the role we want to play in our culture. Just because I'm alone in my room with my phone, does not mean I'm alone in my room when I'm ON my phone. One is the start of it all. And that is not necessarily a good thing.

10. All are one, so one for all

"We're born alone, we live alone, we die alone".

NO! But sometimes we have to make decisions alone; decisions that have ramifications far outside the "Community-of-one".

By the way, while many know that Orson Welles quote in this often-repeated version, it's incomplete. Here is the whole quote:

“We're born alone, we live alone, we die alone. Only through our love and friendship can we create the illusion for the moment that we're not alone.”

I know what he means, and let's not call it an illusion. Let's call it a vision. Our UU congregations affirm to "challenge each other to be our best selves." We have to use our liberty responsibly to determine justice, if we ever hope to have peace.

And so, I submit one final tweak to our critically important Sixth Unitarian Universalist Principle:

“Embrace the World Community, and face the challenges of Peace, Liberty, and Justice for all.”

Only by facing this challenge, do we have a hope of common unity.

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Benediction

Peace, liberty, and justice have been a profound challenge as of late. Having no clear consensus on the covenant of our community has put us in a state of upheaval and uncertainty. Yet, we will get through it. We are completing another leg of our journey. I do not mean these words to convey optimism. Optimism is the idea that everything is going to turn out just fine, no matter what we do; so we're off the hook for concern. Pessimism, is the idea that everything going to hell no matter what we do, so we're off the hook for trying.

I implore you to walk away from here today with hope. Hope is the idea that things are going to be different, however unclear it is what that will look like. It is incumbent upon us to lend our energy to building a road that leads our communities to peace.

Dr. Martin Luther King famously invoked the phrase, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." King actually borrowed that phrase from Theodore Parker. You know that name as one of our Unitarian reformers. These words were not meant by Parker or King to convey optimism. The reason the moral arc bends toward justice is because "One is the start of it all": You, me, and everyone else who has a vision of a high standard of justice, must all reach up and hang on to that moral arc, to bend it in the right direction.

And above all, respect the mic.