

Real Plenty

This would ordinarily be my “candidating sermon,” but we have an important issue to discuss and little time. In normal times, a minister who has not spoken at the congregation recently (say, for two years) is interviewed by a search committee and, if approved as the best of those available, the candidate minister gives a sermon, meets with various people during the following week, and then gives a candidating sermon before a congregational vote is taken. I was initially hired as a “contract minister” by the board when no half-time minister could be found; a “settled minister” is hired by a vote of the congregation. I could have simply extended the contract, but I want to re-establish a norm of direct democracy here, so you get to/have to vote.

The candidating sermon typically follows a time-honored formula of cheery gratitude for the opportunity to serve such fine folks, references the place of that congregation in the larger Unitarian Universalist family, and then segues into several key values that minister tries to live out. It ends with a rousing finale of great things everyone could do—together. That is not a bad sermon concept, but the usual framework only makes sense if you had not known me for many years and had not heard sermons from me over the last year and a half and occasionally for the 40 years before. Therefore, today we consider the proposed Eighth Principle.

As background, here are the Unitarian Universalist Seven Principles that have, with minor word changes, guided us for many years:

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;

The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;

The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;

Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

We have limited time to consider the proposed eighth principle add-on to the current seven principles that comprise our core beliefs, so I will speak about the proposed eighth principle today. We have work to do! Several people advised me not to do a sermon on the proposed eighth principle to the current UU seven principles, the Eighth for short, as being too divisive. Thank you, Sarita, my beloved wife, for trying to protect me from myself; thanks also to some Board members, who thought it would be difficult to rile people up and then expect them to come together to approve me as the settled minister. However, it is timely, months ahead of General Assembly, to consider where we stand on the Eighth since only 55 other congregations have approved the Eighth but there are hundreds of congregations who have not decided yes or no. General Assembly is where delegates and clergy from Unitarian Universalist congregations gather to teach, preach, politic, and vote on important matters. Clergy and lay delegates from congregations vote on candidates for national committees, budget items, resolutions on current affairs of great concern, and attend workshops. If enough congregations approve the eighth principle, it goes to the next step at General Assembly.

I will examine the Eighth, propose some pros and cons, and support some options. This is an example of how I minister—I encourage dialogue, favor participation, and promote direct democracy. After the sermon you can respond during sharing time and coffee hour. I will listen. The Eighth is printed in your order of service, and it reads thus:

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

Journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.

The wording of the Eighth was hammered out by a commission that included 3 former clergy of this congregation. I am sure they sincerely favor anti-racism work. However, the wording is awkward and illustrates that old saying that a camel is a horse created by committee. I can't even remember the seven principles we have (and very few people can) and this proposed Eighth is a real mouth-breaker. Further, although the cause is honorable, the wordy jargon is already outdated. I agree with John Freund, who spoke here last Sunday and reportedly said to a congregant that the Eighth is too wordy, not necessary, and that 7 is also too many. A principle should be a guidestar and more than 2 or 3 dilutes the point. (personal communication from Susan Greenberg, 3/7/2023)

Fourth Universalist in Manhattan put out a support statement for the Eighth, saying:

Our existing 7 principles only imply this 8th principle. Dismantling racism, white supremacy, and other existing oppressions requires work at the personal and institutional level. The best way for us to truly support racial justice in a significant way is to purge ourselves and our institutions of racist and white supremacy culture.

I agree that racism is an egregious oppression, but racism is only part of a web of oppressions, such as oppression of women, LGBTQ+, the disabled, etc. Once we start listing them, we have separate manifestos, not a spiritual principle. But lumping "other oppressions" together as secondarily oppressive doesn't win any hearts. However, "Justice" is already included twice in the 7 principles. That should be sufficient.

Finally, if we focus on this particular FUSW congregation, there is wording in my proposed contract, provided by the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association, that addresses the issue more fully:

The Congregation and the Minister affirm our mutual commitment to address the systemic prejudices and biases found within all parts of society by, among other things, working to ensure that the Minister, members of the Congregation, and staff are trained to welcome and better serve a multiracial, multiethnic, increasingly diverse community and enhance the

ability of each individual to live our values of justice, equity, and interdependence.

(The contract continues) The Board and minister are committed to an ongoing process to address the ways systems of oppression within and beyond our Congregation are perpetuated and agree to collaborate on the development of a joint process of reflection and growth to ensure progress.

I like that this commitment is something that each of you, not just delegates to a remote General Assembly, can vote on. Messy and complicated as it is, participatory, direct democracy promotes personal responsibility. If you vote to call me as your minister, we are all committed to pursue justice, equity and interdependence. If you vote to call me, we are all committed to the positive development of freedom and equality.

We have been so isolated by Covid that I have previously concentrated on rebuilding our community. Should you decide to call me, I won't ignore inequities. Let me remind you that "In 2021, the median non-Hispanic white household made nearly \$78,000, compared with just over \$48,000 and just under \$58,000 for Black and Hispanic households respectively." (Keith Reid-Cleveland, Nura Hussein, "11 Charts Examining the Racial Wealth Gap", [Morningstar.com/specials,1/25/2022](https://www.morningstar.com/specials/1/25/2022), pg.2) This has huge negative effects on student loan repayment, saving, and retirement. It drags down our entire economy as it trashes the hopes and dreams of people who otherwise could contribute to our wellbeing. These real issues deserve our attention. How can we focus attention on "the free and responsible search for truth and meaning" in spiritual terms that energize us toward positive action? We need action that is spiritually generous.

In contrast to the negative focus of the proposed Eighth Principle—"dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves"—we need to positively move toward a better future. By now, it is a cliché for sophisticated people to accept that they have internalized racism, but 50% of Americans are going to read that and feel shamed and blamed and go away. It doesn't motivate people to feel welcomed.

There is a difference in people's motivation between a plenty vs. a scarcity mindset. Those who heard the promises in the American Constitution and laws but were red-lined out of many neighborhoods had a scarcity mindset forced upon them. Those who heard the promise of "freedom and equality for all" but were forbidden to attend good schools or vote or get jobs for which they were qualified or were shot dead for having a broken car tail light had a scarcity mindset forced upon them. "Truth-telling engenders a plenty mindset. Lying engenders a scarcity mindset" . . . [and for those of us who are privileged, it doesn't free us, it binds us in a web of deceit that rots the soul if unhealed. Being privileged means knowing that we are implicated in a lie, knowing that we too could fall afoul of prejudice and bias from whatever direction, knowing that we are part of a system riddled with prejudice and bias and therefore corrupted by greed and hurt—and therefore trapped in systemic scarcity.]

When the people around us are reliable and tell us the truth, including keeping promises they've made to us, we feel more confident about the world and our own future in it. We feel we can rely not just on them but also on the world to be an orderly, predictable, safe kind of place. Even in the midst of scarcity, we feel confident that things will turn out okay. This is a plenty mindset.

When the people around us lie and don't keep their promises, we feel less confident about the future. The world becomes a dangerous place that can't be relied upon to be orderly, predictable, or safe. We go into competitive survival mode and favor short-term gains over long-term ones, independent of actual material wealth. This is a scarcity mindset." (Anna Lembke, Dopamine Nation, pp. 194-5)

"Social media exaggeration and "post-truth" politics (let's call it what it is, lying) amplify our sense of scarcity. The result is that even amidst plenty, we feel impoverished." (Lembke, pg.196) I believe the Eighth Principle comes out of an impoverished, wounded mindset. I get it—it makes sense given what we have struggled against—but I won't let that define us.

"Just as it is possible to have a scarcity mindset amidst plenty, it is also possible to have a plenty mindset amidst scarcity. The feeling of plenty comes

from a source beyond the material world. Believing in or working toward something outside ourselves and fostering a life rich in human connectedness and meaning, can function as social glue . . ." (Lembke, pp.196-7) So I won't focus inwardly; I will explore equality for all. I am more interested in economic, legal, and social freedom. I am more interested in the benefits of diversity for fostering creativity when we bring people together to think through social change in order to have a broad range of possible options to consider. I am interested in the generosity of spirit that energizes a durable commitment for equity.

I want some of the fine writers and editors in our congregation to propose a preferable additional principle or a Social Responsibility resolution that addresses economic, social and legal justice reforms. I suggest that we not just avoid endorsing a highly flawed Eighth but compose a positive alternative. Let us write out of our plentiful generosity, our ability to give purposefully, and our energy to build a just tomorrow. Perhaps we can join efforts begun in California to "discuss and issue recommendations about establishing reparations for slavery and racial terror." (aol.com/news,"California's reparations task force aims to ignite a national paradigm shift" 3/5/2023) How would we invest in education and health care to provide everyone a fair chance at being their best selves? How would we invest in housing, so everyone is safe and productive? How would we help everyone to feel valued and encouraged?

I guess I preached a candidating sermon after all. But I don't think of it as a candidating sermon for me to be your minister, but for all of us to be part of the ministry of all believers. We are all called to speak our truths, dialogue with each other, and arrive at the best truth we can possibly find. We are all called to generously give of our energy, time, and money to those who need the promises kept, the truths fulfilled, and the plenty of this world bestowed upon them. So be it.