

Where Does Your Conscience Lead?
(*Seven Principles series*)
(Version 1a)

A Sunday service led by the
Reverend Michael Walker, Interim Minister

Presented on October 16, 2016, at the
Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

CALL TO WORSHIP (by Rev. Michael Walker)

As we light our chalice during this election season,

Recall the torch of Lady Liberty,

Long may she stand in an American harbor,

Lighting up our land of freedom and democracy.

Let this little flame, like Hers, be a reminder to us all:

That this light illuminate one's conscience,

That this flame is the stirring of action within us,

And that we live out our Principles as best we can.

Let this little flame be a symbol and inspiration

Of something so much greater.

Let it shine, let it be a beacon

Of conscience, freedom and democracy.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

JOYS AND SORROWS (Market Street)

Recently, we added a time of Silent Joys and Sorrows to our services here at Market Street. This is a time in which we can acknowledge those things we hold in hearts, whether those things be joyful or sad.

If you feel called to mark some joy or sorrow in your personal life, you are invited to come forward and choose a stone from the heart-basket; hold it, admire it, imagine your joy or sorrow coming to reside in this symbol.

Of course, these stones can mean whatever you want them to, but we picked out these colors based on the sky. Joys might be blue for clear skies or yellow for sunny skies, while the darker stones can symbolize your sorrows, as an overcast or stormy sky. If you have a joy

or sorrow you wish to acknowledge, please come forward.

MEDITATION (by Rev. Michael Walker)

Being a caring community, we *celebrate* the joys and *share* the sorrows, whether we have told others about them or hold onto them in silence. We do so, so that our friends do not carry these alone. You are invited into a moment of silence and meditation, as we hold these joys and these sorrows in our hearts and minds.

[Silence]

Thank you. Blessed be.

OFFERING

This congregation offers a liberal spiritual home to seekers from all walks of life. We are proud of the work we do in the community, the classes we offer for children and adults, for the care and concern provided by this community and its staff, and for these two beautiful campuses that have each become a spiritual home for so many.

If you are here for the first time, we invite you to let the offering basket pass you by, because you are our honored guest. And if you have made this your spiritual home, we thank you for your continuing generosity.

Every month, we also collect donations during the Offering to support a worthy cause. This month, our Share-the-Plate Recipient is _____.

If you are writing a check, please specify on the Memo line whether this is for your Pledge, an offering to UCH, or for the Share-the-Plate recipient.

Thank you, all, for your generosity. This morning's offering will now be received.

Where Does Your Conscience Lead?

(Seven Principles series)

Reverend Michael Walker

Where does your conscience lead? How does it affect the way in which you move through life and how you practice your civic duties? We examine these questions today through the lens of the Fifth Principle¹ of Unitarian Universalism. You may recall that this year, I'm periodically preaching a series of sermons on the seven UU principles, although I'm doing them out of order. This is the second sermon in the series, but I've jumped to the Fifth Principle, due to our upcoming national election. This principle says that UU congregations affirm and promote "*the right of*

¹ <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles>

conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large."

The Fifth Principle is, honestly, not one we spend a lot of time talking about in our churches, but it seems to be deeply ingrained in our members, as a matter of course. Speaking of our active engagement in, and not just passive witness to, political processes, the Rev. Stephen Fritchman once preached,²

Political issues, to Unitarians, are very often ethical issues which involve the demolition or survival of our basic values: justice, equality, brotherhood, truth-seeking.

Fritchman wrote a long time ago; he said *brotherhood*, I

² Fritchman, Stephen H. *For the Sake of Clarity: Selected Sermons and Addresses*. (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1992.) p. 42.

would say *fellowship*.

As a matter of law and tradition, churches and ministers (when speaking for the church rather than as an individual) do not publicly speak about or endorse political candidates, do not sponsor canvassing efforts for candidates, and so on. We **do**, however, speak about ethics, values and principles that we uphold. If it seems like I am preaching to the choir, I'm doing so to remind all of us not only to participate in elections, but also to encourage you *to encourage others* to do the same.

To start us off, let me paint a picture for you...

Democracy is like a rose-bush. Like most plants, sometime in its evolution, it began as a seed – in this case, the seed is the idea of democracy as governance by

and for the people. The rose then began to grow and eventually bloom, just as our democratic process has grown to become a working system (most of the time – I will say more about this later). And, like all plants, this rose-bush of democracy needs to be cared for: watered, nourished and occasionally pruned. This is a sacred and spiritual duty for us. But, please, do be careful of the thorns – even in democratic systems, there are occasions when the system has gotten prickly, and we might hurt ourselves if we are not paying close attention to what we are doing. When the rose blooms, it is a beautiful thing – as is democracy, when it's working well. But if we do not nurture the rose, it may wilt or even die. This is also true of the democratic process, without our participation.

We use this process in UU churches, as well as do many other denominations – we’re not unique in that. But democracy in religious communities was not always the case, though. I imagine that most people here recall the story of Exodus, and the servant-leadership of Moses, who came to be known as *the Lawgiver*, first by dictating the Covenant that is included in the Book of Exodus. Then, Moses is said to have spoken with God up on Mt. Sinai, at which time he received the Ten Commandments engraved on stone tablets, which he then presented to his community. The Books of Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy further lay out laws, cementing Moses’ status as *the Lawgiver* of ancient Hebrew culture. Of course, this account of governance and the prescription of God’s laws was hardly democratic, and there was little

room for a person to follow his or her own conscience.

We find the roots of democracy in ancient Greece. 500 years before the Common Era, in the city-state of Athens, they developed a democracy of citizens. They still weren’t quite there yet, in terms of democracy as we know it today. In Athens, a person was a citizen and had suffrage only if they were a free and native, land-owning man, over the age of 20. Women, slaves, foreigners, non-landowners and males under 20, were excluded from participating in the assemblies at which citizens engaged in direct democracy.

It was later in the Roman Republic that the representative form of democracy that is now emulated by many countries (including the U.S.) was developed. However, it is worth noting that there were several Asian

and Native American cultures who are also believed to have developed representative democracy on their own, at various points in history. I bring this up, since so many written histories tend to have a Euro-centric focus.

For all the centuries that democracy has been a part of the human experience, it has been accompanied by cynicism. One can be forgiven for the occasional cynical thought, looking at what is happening in the political world at any given time. Too often, though, I've heard it remarked on the street or elsewhere that someone intends not to vote, because they believe it won't make a difference. Very recently, like most of you I'm sure, I've listened to political discussions happening at the national level, and been dismayed at the lack of civility from the

mouths of some, or at least from the mouth of one.

It is here, in this spot, this moment – hearing some of the uncivil and disrespectful words in the political discourse – that I stop and plant my staff in the dirt and say, *'No more! No more.'* It is here that my conscience has said to me, *I can lead you no further until this illness has been healed.* In this political climate, I come to realize that cynicism is a symptom of sickness (just as is demagoguery, if you wanted to know), and the practice of democracy is one treatment available to us. My conscience – and I imagine yours as well – causes me to take stock of society and its governance, around the world but particularly in the US during this election season, and to participate in the process and the national discussion. Speaking for myself only, I cannot sit idly

by. I cannot afford to feel overly cynical and therefore choose not to participate. On the other hand, it also does not do to be so invested in a particular viewpoint about a given issue or candidate that no new information can sway that viewpoint. The old poet, William Blake, wittily said,³ *“The man who never alters his opinion is like standing water, and breeds reptiles of the mind.”* Well, okay then, let’s give ourselves a little bit of leeway – yes, we can feel cynical, but we should not carve our opinions in stone, nor allow ourselves to become paralyzed, preventing us from participating in the democratic process.

³ <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/4955-the-man-who-never-alters-his-opinion-is-like-standing>

Democracy is a working system, until it’s not... I said I’d come back to this. We have been witness to a growing trend of polarization; we especially notice it in our country, but it is actually happening in a great many countries in recent years. I find that to be interesting, puzzling, and yet disturbing, because this polarization and the increase in violent rhetoric and actual violence is now so common in so many countries. I cannot say that I know a reason why, although I suspect that there are a great many reasons, and this era is a perfect storm in bringing out these contrarian world-views.

It is when faced with such rhetoric that I try to get beyond my knee-jerk reaction and recall our principles.

Putting this in terms of our First Principle,⁴ honoring the *inherent worth of all people*, and upholding the *dignity of all*, as well, is so important. Of late, it seems the current presidential election has veered far, far off course. In many ways, but I want to particularly lift up the dignity of women and girls who have not been honored by some; this is something about which we can and should speak out. We are called to uphold and honor inherent worth of each and every person, no matter the gender, orientation, race, class or creed, or – yes, I am going to say this – or even political affiliation.

A person recently said something that so speaks to my heart and the way in which I want to be in the world, that I want to say it here, as well. You probably heard

⁴ <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles>

Michelle Obama say: “*When they go low, we go high.*”

I try to remind myself of these words when I’m faced with people who have resorted to disrespectful words and actions. That idea – *when they go low, we go high* – reminds us to bring civility back to our civic activities. It is a direction in which we can follow the lead of one’s conscience. It has been good, I think, for a person with such moral authority, as the First Lady and a mother, to reintroduce morality to the discussion.

The other day, I came across an old sermon from my elder colleague, Ken Collier. It was in a book published in the 90s, but I think his words are even more

relevant today. He wrote:⁵

... Perhaps [the 5th UU Principle about conscience and democracy] is more important now, at this point in American history, than at any time since the US Civil War, and it explains why it is so important that Unitarian Universalism ... spread its message. [...] [We] bear a responsibility to bring this Principle, which is part of the core of our teachings, to life. This is the principle that incarnates in culture and government our dedication to the inherent worth and dignity of all. This is the principle that brings us face to face with the necessity of compassion and love, not as mere

⁵ Collier, Kenneth W. *Our Seven Principles in Story and Verse*. (Boston, Skinner: 1997) pp. 79-80.

intellectual, philosophical principles, but as something real and in the flesh [...] America needs this principle. If we, for whom it is central, do not live within its spirit and work hard for its manifestation, who will? And if not now, when?

I find Collier's words to be so pertinent now, in light of the violent rhetoric and actions that are becoming more common. He is speaking to the conscience of each of us, and appealing to our sense of *justice, equity and compassion*, another of our UU Principles.⁶ He is asking that we each let our conscience guide us to take action, through civic engagement.

⁶ <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles>

One might ask, though, *what do we do when the dictates of one person's conscience is in conflict with someone else's?* What does it mean when we promote our *right of conscience?* John Mears, a history professor and UU, explained it this way:⁷

One way of grasping the rights of conscience and the use of a democratic approach is to examine them as different manifestations of the same process. Remaining true to one's conscience, like involvement in a democratic system, is an arduous and never-ending task. We must constantly review what we believe to be right or true in the light of new evidence, never being

completely certain about the limits of our all-too-fallible judgment. [...]

Belief in the rights of conscience presupposes more than diversity of opinion. It assumes an unfolding of our understanding as a consequence of what we ourselves have experienced and how we have reflected upon the world around us. [...]

Of course, listening to our own consciences is one thing. Allowing others the same privilege is another matter. We quickly become restive with those who disagree with us on vital matters.

I would add that this seems especially present in the current presidential campaign, and within groups of

⁷ Mears, John A. "Rights of Conscience and the Democratic Process" in *What Unitarian Universalists Believe*, F. Forrester Church, ed. (UU Denominational Grants Panel, 1987). pp. 54-55.

polarized followers on **all** sides. It is important, in my view, that we not allow our consciences to lead us to a place beyond cynicism... Vigilance and introspection is necessary, so that cynical reactions and vexing doubts about opposing worldviews do not lead us into a state of despair. I encourage you to listen to your conscience, vote your values, and most importantly, encourage others to go out and do likewise.

Please consider these words from Sarah Van Gelder, the founding editor of *YES!* magazine. She wrote:⁸

Participation in the political process does not

⁸ Van Gelder, Sarah R., "Meditation," in *The Seven Principles in Word and Worship*, Ellen Brandenburg, Ed. (Boston: Skinner House, 2007), p. 85.

require us to sink to dirty politics or reduce our vision to sound bites. As our circle of compassion has expanded, so have our capacities to keep ego from dominating the world, to build movements based on distributed power, to listen deeply to the fears and the hopes of those we are trying to reach, and to choose language that communicates our common humanity and aspirations.

Sarah wrote that more than a decade ago, but it almost sounds like she was describing current political events.

A couple final thoughts to bring us to a close...

We are people who take our democracy seriously, even if others around us do not, at least not right now. It is a core value of our faith that we practice democracy, and

model this practice for others. This practice includes each person examining her or his own conscience, speaking with civility and respect, and expecting others to do the same. Let us approach the upcoming elections, and all others in the future, with open eyes, open hearts and open minds. No *'reptiles of the mind'* allowed...

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

BENEDICTION (by Rev. Michael Walker)

When we exit these doors, we re-enter the outside world.
We leave behind the rarified air of our liberal haven,
And are shocked by the cold air of a different reality.
In a cold, callous and sometimes angry society,
It is our actions of conscience that bring warmth.
It is our actions of compassion that bring civility.
It is our actions of care that bring mutual understanding.
Let this be our mission that we share with others,
Here, there and everywhere we shall go,
Until we meet here again.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!
