

Encouraging Words:
Acceptance & Spiritual Growth
(Seven Principles series)
(Version 1a)

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

Presented on January 16, 2017, at the
Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

WELCOME

Dear friends, some who are new, some who are not, you are welcome here – one and all. We are a welcoming community which honors the inherent worth of all people, regardless of age, ethnicity, gender, orientation, socio-economic class, or other attributes that only serve to divide our society. Here, we welcome you as you are, and are glad you came to be with us today. You may have been coming here for years, even decades; or you may have been coming here for just a few weeks; or, this might even be your first time here, ever. Regardless of how long you have been here, we have one thing to say to you all: **Welcome Home!** Please take a few moments now to greet your neighbors.

CALL TO WORSHIP (by Rev. Michael Walker)

Come into the circle – you all belong here.
Come into the light and be embraced for who you are.
Come and share what gifts of life you bring.
Come, be part of this community.

Here, we gather as people of open hearts and minds.
Here, we seek to learn the mysteries of life together.
Here and there, we teach and show what we learnt.
Here, we embrace each in our community, flaws and all.

In honor of this commitment to seek and learn together,
We light our chalice as the symbolic beacon lighting
our way on this journey, on this exploration of life.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

JOYS AND SORROWS (Market Street)

During our time of Silent Joys and Sorrows, we acknowledge those things we hold in hearts, whether they be joyful or sad. If you wish to mark some joy or sorrow in your personal life, you're invited to come and choose a disc from the heart-basket; hold it, admire it, imagine your joy or sorrow coming to reside in this symbol.

Of course, these can mean whatever you want them to, but we picked out the colors based on the sky. Joys might be blue for clear skies or yellow for sunny skies, while the dark 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

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 now invited into a moment of silence and meditation, as we hold these joys and these sorrows in our hearts and minds. We will bring our meditation to a conclusion by joining in singing a Musical Meditation, Hymn # _____, _____ (name) in the (grey/teal) hymnal.

[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.

Encouraging Words: Acceptance & Spiritual Growth

(Seven Principles series)

Reverend Michael Walker

Today, I'm offering the latest installment in my sermon series about the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism. Our Third Principle states that we *affirm and promote ... acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.*¹

This is not a paltry or meaningless statement; such encouraging words are worth more than the paper on which they are printed. This principle is a core value **and** an appeal for action. If one just said, *we accept one another*, one might think, “*well, duh, of course that’s*

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

why we’re here.” However, we really can go deeper into this principle than one might think at first blush.

The principle of acceptance and spiritual growth is at once both active and passive. We may passively choose to accept one another with all our flaws and foibles, but we also actively encourage each other in our quests for wholeness and spiritual connection with something greater than ourselves.

A pearl of wisdom about the Third Principle comes from my colleague, Rev. Lilli Nye. She wrote that:²

The third principle has two interconnected affirmations — one encourages building an atmosphere of mutual acceptance in a community

² From “Spiritual Growth in Connection,” a sermon by Rev. Lilli Nye, dated January 9, 2011, www.tparkchurch.org/sermons/20102011/01092011.htm

where there can be significant diversity in belief among members, as well as the simple challenge of being unique, flawed, and complex persons in relationship with one another. So, building an atmosphere of mutual acceptance is the first affirmation here. The second is creating an environment where individuals and where the community as a whole will flourish spiritually.

As with all of our principles, the one we consider today can be applied to our own, personal lives; to our congregations; to the surrounding community in which we find ourselves living; and in the larger society and our nation. We have work to do, but this is a case in which our work to help others helps ourselves, as well.

While the Third Principle talks about encouraging spiritual growth in our congregations – and I’ll come back to that – I’d first like to consider how acceptance and spiritual growth can influence our personal lives.

It’s been said that one must love oneself, before being able to love anyone else. I believe that to be true. At the same time, it seems clear to me that acceptance of oneself – with all of our imperfections – is essential. I know that I am my own worst critic, and imagine that others feel likewise. And yet, we all come with baggage, most of which was foisted onto us, not packed by us – if I may stretch the metaphor of baggage. We were raised to be imperfect beings, who had imperfect parents and imperfect friends and imperfect teachers, and so on. It is part of the human experience. Not a one of us is actually perfect. (*Not even Donald Trump.*) Along with all of this imperfection, we were raised with the cultural expectations of our families, childhood neighborhoods, our cultures, races and classes, and our levels of

education. We were raised with the religious teachings of our families of origin. These have affected who each of us has grown to be, and are continuing to grow... to become... Even when we have consciously and deliberately left behind and discarded some part of our cultural, religious or familial heritage, the act of discarding has also affected who we have each grown to become.

An oft-heard story from the lives of UUs is one that I also lived, myself. You may have heard me talk about my father's side of the family, who are conservative and fundamentalist Baptists. Figuring out that I was different than other teenagers, while coming from this family and also living in a small, conservative mountain town, was difficult. Being gay would not have been accepted in our church, so I left our church at age 15. It was part of my growing up to learn to accept myself and to follow my own spiritual path, discarding the religious heritage of my family. I went in search of

people who would accept me as I was, and who encouraged my spiritual growth in many ways. This journey helped shape the person I have become, and am still in the process of becoming; which I say because I believe all of us are always in the process of becoming whatever we will be. There, you've had your monthly dose of theology, now that I've offered up the basic premise of Process Theology! We are forever in the process of becoming...

Let's return now to how this principle influences the work of our UU congregations...

I often say that folks don't usually join a church in order sit on committees. Rather, they join for community and support, to sustain a spiritual practice, or to try to answer some big question looming in their lives. The act of each of us accepting the others who are here creates the safe space needed for spiritual growth.

Oh... Not everyone likes the word 'spiritual,' but

I have a hard time coming up with a different word to describe the experiences we have for which science or logic do not always have answers. For me, spirituality and science are complementary, not contradictory. But, there are those who see them as contradictory, and many have noted that this has been the cause of rifts in many of our congregations. It's a fairly common phenomenon in the UU movement. If we hear something like this, this is when we can pull out our trusty Seven Principles, and especially the Third, and remind each other and ourselves that accepting one another and encouraging spiritual growth is one of our core values.

I really appreciate how my colleague from D.C., the Rev. Rob Hardies, has described how we may live this principle. In his words:³

... [S]piritual growth isn't about a vertical ascent to heaven but about growth in every dimension at

³ Hardies, Robert, "Acceptance of One Another and Encouragement to Spiritual Growth in Our Congregations," in *The Seven Principles in Word and Worship*, Ellen Brandenburg, ed. (Boston: Skinner House, 2007), pp. 42-43.

once. It's spirituality in 3-D. Growth in spirit doesn't measure one's own soul—its volume, its capacity, its size. We need to grow souls that can encounter the other as a unique subject, not an object—in the words of Martin Buber, a "Thou," not an "it." We need souls that can take in the world in all its complexity and diversity, yet still maintain our integrity. And we need souls that can love and be in relationship with all of this complexity. Instead of fight or flight, we need a spiritual posture of embrace.

Indeed. Let's set aside for now the scientific criticism of the concept of *soul*. Hardies references the Jewish theologian, Martin Buber, who is most well-known for his work in defining relationship as a mutual exercise of respect and curiosity, whether that relationship be with someone we don't know and understand, or even if that relationship be between a religious person and their God. Buber spoke of the "I-Thou" relationship, defining the

‘other’ (whatever that ‘other’ may be), as a ‘thou,’ not an ‘it.’ We use ‘othering’ and refer to things we don’t like as an ‘it’, as a way of diminishing the value of the other. However, *thou*, an old word not used much anymore, implies respect, and acknowledgement of the ‘other’ as worthy of that respect.

So, now I wonder what to do with this... *How does this church extend respect and acceptance, not only of each other in this room, but to others outside of here? How do we honor the other as someone or something worthy, even if it is different than us?* We can apply this to our ongoing discussion in this church about racial justice. We can apply it to class and how different neighborhoods in our city are treated differently by the authorities, based on the socio-economic class of its residents.

Accepting one another in our surrounding community is sometimes hard to do. Walking the streets

of Harrisburg, I see people of many classes, creeds and kinds, and know that not everyone feels accepted by others. And, in fact, not everyone *is* accepted by others.

However, just recently, I heard members of this congregation talking about reaching out to local mosques and their spiritual leaders, *imams*, to let them know that we welcome them in our communities and honor their cultures and beliefs as a part of the multi-hued fabric of our town and, in fact, all of America. We haven’t done that, but what would happen if we did?

There used to be a mosque next door to [this/the] Market Street building. They have since moved, but they used to be in the little building just across 16th Street from the side of our building. They were our neighbors, and some of their members were quite neighborly. Not long ago, they hosted a community event with the purpose of raising awareness of violence to and from youth in the neighborhood, with the intention of helping to develop different ways of being in relationship with

each other, so that the youth don't find the use of violence necessary. The mosque further wished to build a community movement around this issue.

Some of the members of the mosque lived into just the thing Hardies described in the last reading – the Muslim souls from across the street reached out to embrace the 'other' (and, for a bit of role reversal in our rather Christocentric culture, the 'other' was me, in this case.) They made sure I was invited to their event. I reflected later that this was interesting – as a religious leader in a very different tradition, and as a white, middle class person, who doesn't even live in the neighborhood – that it was interesting to me that they thought to reach out and ask me to participate.

I wasn't able to do so, and I was also unsure what I could offer in the way of changing the thinking of youth who don't necessarily subscribe to our UU Principles. But, this experience has also caused me to pause and consider, *what would happen if I were to reach out and*

embrace the other, in the same way as our former neighbors?

Another thing this experience reminded me of was that acceptance may be offered as a one-way gift, but to truly live it as a community, it is a two-way street. Mutual acceptance, respect, and generosity of spirit are social graces that cut across divisions of economic class, ethnicity or race, and religion.

In society-at-large and in our nation, living the Third Principle now seems to have gained some urgency. Recently, I've reflected on the lack of acceptance and respect exhibited by our purported leaders. Many here have lamented about the twittering President to be inaugurated in just 5 days. As hard as it is for many of us to accept the results of the last election, **that's just what we need to do.**

As we look to the future, one may also recall the recent past. Over the last several years, many have

asked: *What happened to acceptance? What happened to bipartisanship and compromise, based in mutual respect, even if those involved differ in their viewpoints? Why has dialogue fled the Capitol?* As we look toward the future, we may worry that the situation will only get worse, before it gets better. Perhaps that will be true. But it will be very important that we not lose sight of our Principles; that we still find ways to accept those who differ from us, even if they do not offer the same in return. Especially when they do not offer the same in return.

Acceptance of the election results does not mean that we will sit by and allow incivilities to stand in place of those aforementioned social graces. It does not mean that we shall acquiesce to any crimes committed in our names. Although we must accept the results of the election, let us also learn (or better yet, *create*) ways to move forward, to ensure that our progressive values continue to be heard in the town square and in hallowed

halls of the Capitol. By this, I mean: We should not sit silent while the hard-won rights of minorities are eroded; or that the power of a woman to make her own reproductive choices is denied; or our public lands and waters are auctioned off to, or polluted by, oil and gas companies.

Our work in the nation, as Unitarian Universalists and progressives, is to ensure that those without voice or agency have representation in the conversations of our leaders. Also, that those with slippery ethics are held accountable. That civility continues to be injected into bipartisan dialogue, whether our elected leaders like it or not. Let us remind ourselves and others that we are all sharing this Earth together, that we are in relationship with each other, even with those who may be different than ourselves, even with all of *their* flaws and foibles.

Earlier, I made mention of a pearl of wisdom by Lilli Nye, who discussed having “*mutual acceptance in a community where there can be significant diversity in*

belief among members.” If that doesn’t describe Congress just as well as a UU congregation, then I don’t know what does.

Diversity is no reason to prevent our embrace of others. As we accept one another, we give honor to the great diversity found in our world, nation, local community, church and perhaps even in our families.

The great mystery of life is that we generally do not have all the answers. Sometimes we learn to live with the questions, the ambiguities, the diversity of humanity with all its flaws. When we accept one another, with respect and generosity of spirit, we live out our core values – and the Third UU Principle – in a way that touches the lives of many others, even if we do not know it or them. When the passive principle of acceptance is turned into the active principle of embrace and exploration, new and interesting things are revealed to us about the people in which we are in relationship

with, as well as within our very own selves. We may not always understand those things we learn, but that is not the point.

I will conclude with a poem by Patrick Murfin:⁴

We believe –

*that many streams join to make a river,
that the way to wisdom lies in an open ear
and heart,
that goodness may be pursued for the sake
of goodness
and not from fear of punishment,
that knowing and not knowing are part of
the same,
and ambiguity is permissible.*

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

⁴ *Lifting Our Voices: Readings in the Living Tradition*. (Boston: UUA, 2015), # 238.

BENEDICTION (by John O'Donohue)⁵

*May you listen to your longing to be true and free,
And may you also know the shelter of home;
May the circles of your belonging be large enough
for the dreams of your soul;
May you arise each day with a voice of blessing whispering
in your heart that something good is going to happen to you;
May you find a harmony between your soul and your life;
May the house of your soul never become a haunted place;
May you know the eternal longing that is at the heart of time;
May there be kindness in your gaze when you look within,
and when you behold others;
May you be free from the prisons of guilt, fear,
disappointment, and despair,
And may you never place walls between the light and yourself;
May you allow the family of life to gather you, mind you,
and embrace you in belonging.*

⁵ This poem, taken from O'Donohue's book, *Eternal Echoes: Celtic Reflections on Our Yearning to Belong*, was found with Rev. Nye's sermon (www.tparkerchurch.org/sermons/20102011/01092011.htm)