

Seekers on a Journey:
A Free & Responsible Search for Truth
(*Seven Principles* series)
(Version 1a)

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

Presented on April 9, 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)

Historically, our Flaming Chalice has been

a beacon of hope in uncertain times.

It once showed a way so some could escape persecution,

now it shines on a path to a community of seekers.

We may come seeking ultimate truth and yet, we know...

that there is not just one ultimate truth.

Let the flame we kindle today light our path

as we search ever further and deeper for meaning.

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.

Seekers on a Journey:
A Free & Responsible Search for Truth
(Seven Principles series)
Reverend Michael Walker

In this latest installment of my sermon series about the Seven UU Principles, we will reflect upon our **Fourth Principle**, in which we affirm and promote ... **a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.**

[You may have noticed that the Principles have been presented out of order. I had to change the schedule to accommodate our guest preacher a couple of weeks ago.]

To get us started, I'd like to share some words by my colleague in ministry, Paige Getty, who wrote:¹

¹ Getty, Paige. "A Free and Responsible Search for Truth and Meaning," in Ellen Brandenburg, ed., *The Seven Principles in Word and Worship*. (Boston: Skinner House, 2007.) pp. 60-61.

As a faith tradition, Unitarian Universalism makes sacred the right and responsibility to engage in this free and responsible quest as an act of religious devotion. Institutionally, we have left open the questions of what truth and meaning are, acknowledging that mindful people will, in every age, discover new insights into the human condition and into the enduring dilemma of mortality.

With privilege and freedom comes responsibility. It is our responsibility to use our reason, in the tradition of our Unitarian forebears, to serve our faith. We do not rely solely on the truths revealed in a single sacred text, for we understand that such texts were, and are, composed by humans for a particular people in a particular time and place. But we also

don't dismiss any text without considering its value. Likewise, we must not rely solely on our own perspective. A responsible use of reason requires that we consider more than one perspective before coming to a conclusion. It calls us to acknowledge the legitimacy of perspectives that differ from our own. It compels us to remain open to new truths, new understanding, new meaning.

Here ends the reading.

Some spiritual traditions claim to have the final word on Truth (with a capital T), saying that 'revelation is sealed' and we have been given the sum totality of knowledge that God wills us to have. This presumes there is nothing more to learn than has already been

written down in a sacred text, which is usually centuries old. The aforementioned spiritual forebears of Unitarianism were free-thinkers, inspired by new ways of acquiring knowledge and a philosophy of rationalism that arose during the Age of Enlightenment. Thus, ours became a tradition in which spiritual exploration is not only allowed, but is also encouraged.

I, like many of you, came from a different spiritual tradition before finding UUism. Some here may know that I was raised in a fundamentalist, Baptist church. From around the age of 12 or so, I began to doubt the doctrines of my family's church. I began to question the rigid, conservative worldview that they espoused as the one true way. Critical thinking was discouraged. By the time I was 15, I had begun to learn some things about

myself, such as being gay. My break with the church came during this period, on that Sunday that Pastor Tim preached what I could only characterize as a real *hellfire and brimstone* sermon about those godless, sinful queers.

My family's church was one that claimed that 'revelation is sealed', and that the Bible is the only authority for all things in life, no matter what. Set aside the fact that this book – much of which was originally written on a set of scrolls – was written for people living in the Middle East, centuries ago. How it was applicable to people here and now was something that I had difficulty understanding, back then. Now, I can find passages that are inspiring and thought-provoking. At the time, though, verses were selectively chosen and thrown around like weapons. Any kid asking

inconvenient questions would be shut down, as I was, more than once. For them, rationalism was not an objective exercise, but rather, it was specifically their mental contortions to *rationalize* all biblical things, in ways that "prove" (which I have in quotes) ... "prove" that their worldview is the correct one. That church provided a home for people who needed to be told something concrete, a set of rigid beliefs, in order to be at peace with themselves. However, those who question, those who try to go deeper, were ignored. Those who were different, or in some way marked as sinful in their worldview, would be shunned.

Rather than stay for that, I decided to set out on a spiritual journey, of sorts. At different times in my life, I explored: atheism, which did not fulfill my spiritual

needs any more than the Baptists; then Paganism, with its accepting community and loving Mother Goddess; and also, Buddhist practices, including meditation.

Eventually, my spiritual journey led me to Unitarian Universalism, with its seven Principles that have become so meaningful for me. In this story, the Fourth Principle encouraging one's search for truth and meaning gave me a way back into a church community. A way in that still allowed me to be my authentic self. A church that had long ago set aside rigid dogma and belief.

I do have to say, though, that I've heard the converse of a rigidly defined set of beliefs bandied about on a regular basis, in a way that seems to also be less than helpful. How many times have you heard someone

say, lackadaisically, *UUs can believe whatever they want?* Well, it may be true that we seek not to be held to a common creed, nor do we have a test of faith to enter our churches. We strive to set aside dogma through the use of reason and intellect. With that said, it is also true that Unitarian Universalism evolved as a faith, from its roots to the present day, over many centuries and as passed through the minds of many thinkers. We have followed an *arc of justice*, to use Dr. King's words, as well as a progressive worldview that includes as our spiritual foundation that we are **interdependent** with all else and all others, and we seek to uphold the **inherent worth** of all, regardless of race, class, creed or other attributes that are used to try and divide us. Such division is an illusion, by my way of thinking. It is my

firm belief that humanity, and life in general, cannot truly be divided – a possibility that seems to go unnoticed or disregarded by those who believe they have claim to the capital-T *Truth*, chiseled in stone. The fact is, there are many truths, and many paths to seek truth and meaning. In UUism, we may describe ourselves as *Seekers on a Journey*, and that the important part of that is the *journey* itself, not the *destination*.

I love this metaphor of *the spiritual journey*. We are allowed to go sight-seeing, as I did, through various religious and philosophical schools of thought. And, when I found my way to UUism, I was not brushed off or chastised for my search and my connections to other religions. UUs have never said to me what I once heard while in seminary, interviewing for a hospital chaplain

internship. A Catholic priest, during that interview, described me as “some sort of a spiritual swinger.” *Well, thank you, thank you very much.* Luckily for me, in the UU faith I found acceptance and encouragement, which has been something I have valued deeply over the years.

I’m also inspired by words, shared earlier, that were written by Paige Getty. Again, she said:²

Unitarian Universalism makes sacred the right and responsibility to engage in this free and responsible quest as an act of religious devotion.

Some traditions teach that piety in observing the rote teachings they hand-out is the only way to practice religion. What freedom it implies, to say that not only can we feel free to search for our own truth, but that it is

² Ibid.

a sacred duty; that such a search is actually our UU form of religious devotion.

Stated another way, by the poet, Patrick Murfin:³

*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.*

Ambiguity is permissible, he says... The thing about those religious movements, those that like to chisel their beliefs in stone, is that there is no room for

³ UUA, *Lifting Our Voices*, #238.

ambiguity. There are no shades of grey, only black and white. But there is a different way – an exercise of those who cultivate a philosophical frame-of-mind is to hold multiple purported truths in tension, to consider two or more possibilities as equally likely or unlikely. And then not get upset if one or the other proves true based on the latest information we discover.

Beliefs that are elastic enough to stretch and change when science has updated us with new knowledge on a given topic, than we had before, is a foreign concept for those who chisel their beliefs in stone. For those who claim their sacred text is the inerrant word of God, rather than the words of deep thinkers, *people*, who lived long ago and far away.

Lest one think I'm bashing on Christians, I would

add that my spiritual journey has also taught me how to forgive past hurts, and how to let go of my old hang-ups about who *I* am in relation to *their* beliefs. Even my family has evolved over the years, and largely moved away from fundamentalism. Shortly after I started seminary, I was talking with my dad and was surprised to hear how his beliefs had changed since my childhood. What he described for me, he did not have a name for, but I knew what it was. He described universalism, a lower-case ‘u’, in which his understanding of God had evolved to the point that he no longer believed God would damn people to hell. Perhaps he thought of his gay son and his gay daughter, and decided to choose his family over his church. He also talked about the millions of people around the world who did not believe what he

had been taught as a boy, and now thought, “*well, they can’t all be damned, can they?*” And once he thought that, down the slippery slope, he slid!

While I’ve called out the rigidity of beliefs that I experienced, such rigidity isn’t unique to Christianity. In the world that we live in today, we in the Western hemisphere have become more aware of Muslim fundamentalism. Rigid teachings can be found in some corners of the Buddhist and Hindu world, as well. Even among Atheists and scientists, there can be found some rigidity. In all cases, this way of thinking prevents a person from hearing other truths and exploring new avenues of thought.

Alfred North Whitehead developed what he called

process philosophy, which in turn influenced *process theology* which encapsulates all that we've considered today: that revelation is not sealed; that truth is ever unfolding based on new information; that life, philosophy, theology are all **processes** or metaphorical journeys. Whitehead said:⁴

Nothing is more curious than the self-satisfied dogmatism with which mankind at each period of its history cherishes the delusion of the finality of its existing modes of knowledge. ... This dogmatic common sense is the death of the philosophic adventure. The Universe is vast.

The philosophical adventure... The seeker's journey...

⁴ Whitehead, Alfred North, untitled reading in Kathleen Rolenz, ed., *Sources of our Faith*. (Boston: Skinner House, 2012.) p. 104.

That is perhaps a better way of describing Unitarian Universalism than any dogma or creed. In *our free and responsible search for truth and meaning*, we may find ourselves wandering through many waysides along the journey. Sometimes, we take detours, and sometimes, those detours end up being profound and helpful at just the right moment in our lives. Sometimes we travel our spiritual paths on our own, and at other times we share the journey with companions, including other people here. This is the blessing of our religious movement, I think, that we can each find our own way, but often do so together. It's a conundrum, but that's okay. It is a further blessing that we can examine our beliefs through the lens of rationality and perhaps allow said beliefs to evolve, and not feel threatened by this.

There was a Sufi and Yogi poet – he was both at once, because he did not adhere to one, rigid, spiritual path, either. This poet, Kabir, lived in fifteenth century India and once wrote:⁵

If you want the truth, I'll tell you the truth:

Listen to the secret sound, the real sound,

Which is inside of you.

Well, it is often true that the little voice in our heads have some wisdom to share with each of us, and we should give that some credence. Even so, we may not necessarily discover every single thing we need to know within our own thought processes – I think we do need to learn some things from others – but we have the right to apply critical thinking to all issues we are faced with.

⁵ Kabir, untitled reading in Rolenz, p. 123.

Finally, *revelation is not sealed* and new knowledge is continually discovered. I long ago decided that science and faith are not mutually exclusive. And gaining new knowledge, challenging our beliefs, lays before us new paths to travel and new ways of seeing the world. Challenging our beliefs is not a bad thing, in my book. As seekers on a spiritual journey, we recognize that the sum totality of knowledge has **not** already been revealed by God or anyone else; that, in fact, humanity can and does continue to learn and grow.

As do each of us.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

BENEDICTION

In closing, I offer this benediction from the
Commission on Common Worship:⁶

*To walk purposefully in the light truth sheds,
steadily in the openness justice creates,
and compassionately in the warmth love radiates
shall advance us surely toward the good
and shall, in the end, make us responsibly on the earth
and fit companions for one another.*

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

⁶ Commission on Common Worship, untitled reading in Brandenburg, p. 67.