

The Evolution of Love in UU
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I know I can't say a lot about being a loving person that you don't already know. I also believe all of us here strive to be loving people. I will highlight how UU has always regarded love as its central focus, both in terms of belief and encouragement of ethical behavior. I am hoping that learning more about the evolution of UU and our current position regarding love will inspire us to greater commitment to ethical and spiritual practice.

I think it is fair to say that most if not all religions place emphasis on love. We can agree that is a good thing. However religions such as Catholicism, conservative Protestant denominations, Orthodox Judaism, and many forms of Islam require dogmatic beliefs and practices that have nothing to do with being a loving human being. I am not saying that people in these faith traditions are not loving! But it seems to me the dogma detracts from a message of love for ourselves and fellow human beings. Just to name a few examples, Christians require baptism and belief in the trinity and eternal damnation for noncompliance. For Orthodox Jews failure to follow the laws of Moses including eating only kosher foods, circumcision of boys, strict and obsessive observance of the Sabbath and many other rules results also in spending eternity in hell. Moslems have their own rules and restrictions and expectations of damnation that are unrelated to love of others. So while all religions teach love, it seems the message gets obscured by instilling seemingly pointless rules, requiring totally illogical and impossible beliefs, and promoting fear and guilt. These dogmatic faiths also condemn those who believe differently. Through the history of our movement we see the effort to focus on love and reason, over dogma, damnation and a message of exclusiveness. That is why I am here rather than another faith community.

We UU's like to talk about the fact that we are the people that, "side with love," or "stand on the side of love." Although these slogans are recent, the focus on love has always been a central part of both Unitarian and Universalist history. To give a relatively recent example, in June 2012, thousands of Unitarian Universalists gathered at Tent City in Phoenix, Arizona. Holding signs and candles, they formed a sea of bright yellow t-shirts, each emblazoned with the words "Standing on the Side of Love." As the crowd sang hymns in English and Spanish, a handful of ministers were allowed access to walk through the immigrant detention center to see the poor living conditions. The ministers reported that the people inside could hear the singing and those detained told them they were strengthened to know they were not alone. Some of the participants at the gathering were detained in jail.

UU Rev. Carter Smith defined the kind of love we UU's embrace this way:

...love is the will to extend oneself for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth. Love is that impulse, that life energy that says we can do better than this. We can grow; we can deepen; we can live more fully into our

inherent wholeness. Love [means] working toward spiritual growth. Spiritual growth is about being our whole and [imperfect] human selves, working to better honor our interconnectedness and inherent worth in relationship with others.

Part of what makes love a spiritual and ethical practice is that it exists in contrast to baser survival drives that are rooted in the brain stem. Brain scientists have noted that our higher brain functions enable us to experience empathy and compassion. These higher-level capacities are located in the cortex. If anything will save the human race from self-destruction surely it will be love; surely it will be our human capacity to override our baser impulses.

The origin of love as a shared spiritual practice begins with the religions of the “Axial Age,” the period from about 800 to 200 BCE. The views of all the religions at the time were very aligned with what later came to be known as Unitarianism and Universalism. The major religions of the Axial Age were, Taoism and Confucianism, Hinduism and Buddhism, Greek polytheism, and Judaic monotheism. The Axial Age predates Christianity and Islam. Historians of religion have regarded the “Axial Age” as perhaps the most enlightened period in all human history. What made the Axial Age possible is that civilizations had advanced beyond mere survival and subsistence to the opportunity to reflect on spiritual growth, self-actualization, and becoming more enlightened societies. Scholars of the ancient religions found that there was a shared understanding, either deliberate or coincidental, on several important points. It is beyond the scope of our theme of the month to review the complete list of commonalities among the Axial Age religions, but I want to highlight one point of agreement that is relevant to our theme of love. Here is the relevant statement that summarizes what these early religions shared in common: “Reciprocity, compassion, love, and altruism, the Golden Rule, ending suffering for all human beings, all sentient life or perhaps all life is the proper central orientation of human existence.” This summary statement addresses the meaning of love in its broadest ethical and spiritual sense. The spiritual guidance of the Axial Age is what helped reduce violence and warfare in its time. I find this consensus understanding among the Axial Age religions aligns very well with our 7 UU Principles. Unitarianism and Universalism both grew out of the enlightened Judaism that Jesus preached, including the admonition to “love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus inspired others to focus on kindness, mercy, and forgiveness rather than upon meaningless rules and rituals that seemed devoid of meaning. If you want more about this subject, I suggest reading Karen Armstrong’s book on leading a compassionate life.

As you know, UUs do not have a required set of beliefs and no required ritual observances or prohibitions beyond the love of others and concern for the earth. We assert that our deepest common theological grounding and value is “love.” Some will wonder why love is not mentioned among the current 7 Principles. However, if we look closely, we find love implied within each of them. We see love in our insistence on the worth and dignity of every person in the words of the first Principle. We see love in the call for demanding and embodying justice, equity, and compassion in human relations, as stated in Principle 2. We hear it in our urging of acceptance of one another and our

support for each person's spiritual growth, as stated in Principle 3. We can discern an accountable love in our call for a responsible search for truth and meaning, as in Principle 4 addresses, because how can we find truth and meaning without love? Our affirmation of the right of conscience, and the right of every individual to participate in shaping the institutions that govern them, displays a deep respect and love for every person, in accord with Principle 5. We affirm the goal of a peaceful, free, and just world community as an expression of what love can and should bring into being, as we participate in the community and larger world, in accord with Principle 6. And we believe that our call to respect the interdependent web that we are a part of, is an articulation of love for all that is and our own place and role in the interconnected web, as of course stated in Principle 7.

From “the inherent worth and dignity of every person” to “respect for the interdependent web of all existence,” the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism all relate to social justice, highlighting liberty, equity, compassion, sustainability, and peace. Across the country UU services build awareness about social justice issues and call us into ethical and loving response. Marriage equality, protection for LGBT people from discrimination, reproductive justice, healthcare, and income inequality are just a few of the issues of our time being addressed by Unitarian Universalists currently. Unitarian and Universalists of the past advocated for the end of slavery, free public education, and the right of women to vote and to participate in society equally with men, among other social justice issues and all stemming from a love of our fellow humans.

One of the leading UU thinkers of our time Rev. Rebecca Ann Parker, who has worked to update Universalist theology wrote about the practice of love as “salvation.” She uses the word salvation in a very different sense than the traditional Christian one. She quoted liberal theologian Walter Rauschenbusch in saying, “...our universe is not a despotic monarchy with God above the starry canopy and ourselves down here; [rather] it is a spiritual commonwealth with ‘God’ in the midst of us.” In the liberal theological view “sin” is not a betrayal of a heavenly God but a betrayal of one another. When we selfishly disregard the concerns of others, we create tragedies and leave broken hearts in its wake. Without love we alienate ourselves from others. Rauschenbusch and Parker both believe that unselfish love for others, opens the path of “salvation,” in this life. The “God” that Parker refers to, “in our midst,” is the force that creates and sustains life, not the God of the Bible; rather it is the spiritual space between us. In Parker’s words, “...earth itself needs salvation from the damage made by humans; humanity needs the healing and repair from legacies of injustice. We are the cause, and we can be the cure.”

The world needs this liberating message. Love of others is what is needed to save the world from the crises before us: Climate change and water shortages, inequities in the distribution of resources resulting in hunger, lack of shelter and lack of safety, gun violence, efforts to overthrow democracy, and other problems facing our world. Love is the force that moves us beyond selfishness towards enlightened community. This is the core of our contemporary UU theology. The reward for practicing this kind of love is not

a place in heaven but the feeling of satisfaction that one is working for the common good. This is what saves us.

In a talk I gave last fall I spoke about the revisions being worked on regarding the UUA's bylaws. Specifically, the beginning sections of those bylaws, known as "Article II," address our national UU covenant, our principles, and our sources. Today I have an update to share on the Commission's work that will be voted on at General Assembly in June. The Article II Commission report is available on the UUA website. Here is the language of the proposed revision of our national covenant:

As Unitarian Universalists we covenant, congregation to congregation and through our association, to support and assist one another in our ministries. We draw from our heritages of freedom, reason, hope and courage, building on the foundation of love. Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values. We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of love.

The report goes on to say there are core values, "inseparable from one another," displayed as in a circle with love placed in a flaming chalice in the center. The other values in the circle are: Interdependence, Equity, Transformation, Pluralism, Generosity and Justice. The idea behind the graphic is that love informs all the other values in the circle. (This is like what I said about our current 7 Principles.) Each of values around the circle is meant to be seen as a petal of a flower. The intent was to change from a passive description of values, which is what we have now in the Seven Principles, to statements of pledges or "covenants" to act. The changes represent a desire to see ourselves not just as a people who hold certain values in common but who pledge to act on them to improve our world. Here is the description for each of the values listed:

Interdependence: We honor the interdependent web of existence. We covenant to cherish the earth and all beings by creating and nurturing relationships of care and respect. With humility and reverence, we acknowledge our place in the great web of life, and work to repair harm and damaged relationships.

Pluralism. We celebrate that we are all sacred beings diverse in culture, experience, and theology. We covenant to learn from one another in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We embrace our differences and commonalities with Love, curiosity, and respect.

Justice: We work to be diverse multicultural Beloved Communities where all thrive. We covenant to dismantle racism and all forms of systematic oppression. We support the use of inclusive democratic processes to make decisions.

Transformation: We adapt to the changing world. We covenant to collectively transform and grow spiritually and ethically. Openness to change is fundamental to our Unitarian and Universalist heritages, never complete and never perfect.

Gratitude: We cultivate a spirit of generosity and hope. We covenant to freely and compassionately share our faith, presence, and resources. Our generosity connects us to one another in relationships of interdependence and mutuality.

Equity: We declare that every person has the right to flourish with inherent dignity and worthiness. We covenant to us our time, wisdom, attention, and money to build and sustain fully accessible and inclusive communities.

I invite you to go search the Article II revision report on UUA.org and to read the descriptions associated with each of the petals. It seems to me the latest revision is an effort to place love, which has always been part of our heritage, at the center of our revised principles/values. The other important change is that each of the values/principles has a covenant statement attached to it. The revision of Article II is designed to go beyond agreement to a declaration to act in unison, to create a better world, and guided by love.

We in this fellowship have managed to build a “Beloved Community.” However, given the level of anger, divisiveness, and misrepresentation of truth, that has dominated American culture for the last 20 or more years even with all our love, the task of improving the world is not going to be easy. We’re going to need to be wearing our “work clothes” as my wife put it. But with love at every turn here, at the regional and national UU levels and with our partners, we offer the country and world the love that can help to sustain each other on this open-ended build-as-you go effort. The world needs us now as much as ever. I think together we’re have a contribution to make! The Article II revisions if adopted will tell us we have many partners.