

WE'RE ALL IN IT TOGETHER

A Sermon Preached by Cheryl M. Walker
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York
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The unofficial end of summer is upon us. Labor Day, meant to be a day of rest from all who Labor, almost feels like the opposite, a signal that it's time to get back to work. For many its the end of half-day Fridays - back to work full time. For some its the beginning of the new school year - back to the books. Even here, the church year will begin again in earnest and committees that took the summer off will begin their ministries again – back to church. In a way it almost seems like another New Year. And as with all New Years it is a time to take stock of the past year and a time to plan for what is yet to come.

This summer I have preached a series of sermons that revolve around our seven principles. In this series I have tried to show how we might look at our principles not just as a statement we utter when asked what Unitarian Universalists believe but as a way to guide our lives. And I have received a lot of feedback from people, about them. Not everyone agrees with my interpretations, and not everyone disagrees either. But that is the beauty of these principles, they are not meant to be easy to live by or, in some cases, easy to say exactly what they mean to our daily living. I have enjoyed the dialogues that have ensued, especially when you've disagreed with my sermon premise. In many ways this is what it means to be in a community of faith, that we may enter into a dialogue where we may grow our minds and grow our faith. I hope the end of summer does not mark the end of our dialogue but rather the beginning of an ongoing discussion.

I often say of our principles that when we say them, we should add to end of them the statement - for the other guy first and then for me. The other guy being generic, please don't tell me I am not being gender correct. Our first principle would read that we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person, the other guy first and then me. Our second, justice equity and compassion for the other guy first and then for me. Our fourth would be to promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, for the other guy first and then for me. I believe that when we add that little statement, we understand that these principle are not meant just for us, but they are also meant for how we treat other people. World peace and liberty, for the other guy first and then for me means that we will work for freedom and justice for other people and by consequence will gain peace for ourselves. It adds a new dimension to our understanding, that we cannot truly be free unless all people are free. We cannot have peace unless all people have peace. Our spiritual growth is stunted unless all people have the right to pursue their path to spiritual growth. The other guy first and then me.

Yet, there is one principle for which this maxim cannot apply, it is our seventh and last principle: we covenant to respect the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part. In this principle we break down the barriers between us and the other guy. There is no other guy in this statement, there is only us, and that us is all of us. We are each a part of an interdependent web of existence. While we are separate individuals we are part of a greater existence which connects us all together, and what we do effects not only us, but everyone and everything. It is the greatest affirmation of life and the individual -- what we do matters, who we are matters, that we live matters.

We may think that we are living our lives separately but in reality we are all in it together, it being the web of existence. Every action we take, regardless of how big or how small matters when we interact with another person. What an awesome concept and what a huge responsibility it may seem to be. Does every little thing we do matter? Yes, it does. We may not always see the immediate effects of our actions, but they do matter. Speaking harshly to someone, may seem to be a momentary lapse in courtesy, but it may also be the turning point that disaffirms another person. It may have been only a moment for us, but it may have been a lifetime of disrespect for that person. It may reinforce a message that says you are not worthy, you have no dignity that anyone need respect. Yet if that moment had been different and instead of harshness, we offered compassion and understanding, perhaps it becomes a turning point in that person's life. Filled with feelings of disrespect that person might know that at least one person on this earth feels that they are deserving of respect, one person recognizes that they have worth. They might not know it at the moment, they might not even thank you, but somewhere, sometime they might remember that moment and think differently about themselves and differently about the world. All because we chose a different path that day, one of affirmation.

It sounds a little simplistic, but I bet each of us can remember a time when someone said just the right thing at the right moment and somehow we were changed. Maybe the change didn't last, or maybe it changed the way we were forever, but we were changed. Did that person know they had said the right thing at the right moment to us? Doubtful. They just spoke their truth in a way that was meant to uplift our existence and not demean it. Speaking their truth they could have no idea whether their impact was fleeting or life changing. Speaking our truths we can have no idea if our impact is fleeting or eternal. Yet when we speak our truth, in love, we at least may know that we have spoken to affirm rather than harm that web of existence.

When it comes down to it, our seventh principle is a call to us to live intentionally. It asks us to live as if each moment matters and as if someone's life depended on it. Recognizing that we're all in it together, we are challenged to develop an attitude towards life that demands we be fully present to every moment we are on this earth. This is not a particularly new concept. Many Eastern philosophies have called us to do this very same thing, live fully present in each moment. Each moment in the end is all that we have, the past cannot be changed and the future is a promise but never a guarantee. When we are fully present in each moment we open ourselves to feel not only our individual existence but also we may feel the presence of other lives. When we can feel deeply our own lives, with its joys and pains, then can we feel the joys and pains of another and experience grace in its most exquisite form, the touching of two lives that are changed forever.

We begin, this experience of grace, when we take seriously the fact that we do not come into this world alone, and we do not live our lives as islands untouched by other human beings. In that moment, when we realize that we are not alone, that we are part of a web, then our responsibility and our purpose in life is made clear -- uplift, enhance and hold sacred the web in which we live. It is our seventh principle that answers the question for what purpose have I or any of us have been put on this earth for so short a time. To make the web whole, to bind up its jagged edges, to repair it where it has been fractured, to live in its beauty and see in its majesty the true magnificence of the gift of life, now and forever. We are called, however, not to be merely observers of the magnificence of life, but to be active participants in the building of its beauty.

Each of us has been endowed with eternal life. It will not come in the form of a heaven promised in the sweet bye and bye, but rather it comes from the fact that we in our living have forever shaped the form of that web of existence. Our just being here, no matter how long we might live, has shaped the lives of those we have touched, the only question is whether we will bring heaven to this earth or not. In our morning's reading we heard of a woman who wanted to know what was the difference between heaven and hell. In hell all the people had enough food but because they could only think of feeding themselves, they were condemned to starve. In heaven the people had enough food and because they thought to feed each other, they were content and satisfied. The question for you and me, is which shall we create on this earth with our lives, shall we try to get all that we can and starve or shall we learn to feed each other and be fulfilled?

I believe that the reason we come to this church, that we are members of this congregation, is to answer that question with the latter. We come because we know that to feed ourselves we must learn to feed one another. We come because we are a community that believes it is not good enough to take but that we must also find ways to give. We do that in so many ways, because we each of us wants to create heaven here on earth through our words and our deeds. There are so many examples of this that it would take all morning to describe them. Here are only a few. We create heaven on earth when we remember to call a friend we know is going through difficult times, or one we just haven't seen in a while and we let them know that they are important to this community and to us. We create heaven on earth when we volunteer our time to feed those who need a meal, or just the company of other people to know that they matter that someone recognizes them and will one day remember their names when they are not longer here on this earth. We create heaven on earth when we get involved in the larger community beyond the walls of this congregation and seek to find ways to affirm all peoples in all lands. We create heaven on earth when we seek to respond not just to the crisis of the day, but when we remember that the effects of a tragedy last well beyond the initial event.

This past week we remembered the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. Many of you were here last year when our anger turned to action and the members of this congregation generously opened their wallets and in some cases their homes to help alleviate the suffering of the people of New Orleans. And the work is not finished, it is a city still in dire need, so it was with no small measure of pride for this congregation, when I heard that the Young Adult group in this church is planning a trip to New Orleans, later on in the church year, to help not just with their money but with their hands. Putting their faith into action, they have been called to create heaven on earth, one brick at a time. How will you create heaven on earth? How will you shape the web of existence?

This is the question our principles call us to answer - how will we shape the web of existence? And in a way they answer the question for us by beginning with our interactions with each other. Affirming the worth and dignity of every person we shape the web towards wholeness. Seeking justice, compassion and equity in our relationships we shape the web towards peace. Promoting an acceptance of one another and our encouraging our spiritual growth, we shape the web towards reconciliation. Acknowledging our different paths to truth and meaning, we shape the web towards grace and mercy. Supporting the freedom of our consciences we shape the web towards justice. Shaping the web towards a community or world peace with liberty and justice for all peoples we shape the web towards harmony. When we honor the fact that we are all in it together we shape the web towards a new creation, heaven here on earth.

A new church year begins and we are faced again with the challenge of living our principles and making them more than words on the back of the order of service. Are you up for the challenge? It is not an easy undertaking that we embark upon, but one that we as Unitarian Universalists have no choice but to take. We come to this church to be charged with the spirit of a vital faith. We come to be renewed and refreshed that we may change the world one person at a time if need be. We come to find the path to righteous living and the path is there before us, nestled in the ideas of our principles. We need only to take them as our own.

I began the summer with a statement and I'll say it one more time -- we've got good news! Eternal life is yours for the taking and heaven is waiting for you. It is waiting for you to recognize that you might make it real today. It is waiting for all of us to stop trying to feed ourselves alone and start feeding one another. It is waiting for us to rebuild our lands, brick by brick. It is waiting for us to put down the sword and pick up the ploughshare. Heaven is waiting on us to create her. Ain't that good news!

Amen and blessed be.