

“I don’t believe in’ the Seven Principles” by Doug Muder, contributing editor, *UU World*

Over the years, I think I’ve paid my dues on the topic of what Unitarian Universalists believe. I’ve written about it, preached about it, taught Coming of Age classes about it, and been pulled into countless coffee-hour conversations with newcomers. Everyone in America seems to know that religious organizations exist to promote some set of beliefs that their members share. So when people find out you belong to a religion with a tongue-twisting name, that’s their first question: What do you believe?

Like a lot of UUs, I’m never entirely happy with my answer. I dislike my own answers almost as much as I dislike everybody else’s.

The absolute worst of the common answers is “UUs can believe whatever they want.” In fact the exact opposite is true. Maybe more than any other religion, Unitarian Universalism pushes us to ask: “Is that really true or is it just what I want to believe?”

In any essay I wrote after my mother’s funeral, I admitted that I want to believe what my parents raised me to believe: That when our loved ones die, they transcend to a perfect place, where they wait for us to join them in eternal bliss. What’s not to like about that? But precisely because I am a UU, I question ideas whose primary virtue is that I want to believe them.

Once you step around that pothole, discussions tend to gravitate towards the Seven Principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association, which you find at the front of our hymnals and in many congregations’ orders of service. As a list of things that our congregations are committed to affirm and promote, the Principles have at least a formal resemblance to the creeds of Christian churches; we teach them to our children, introductory books are organized around them, and so forth. So if someone comes to a UU congregation looking for the Unitarian Universalist creed, the Principles seem to be it.

But if you’ve ever tried to present the Principles to creed-seeking newcomers, you’ve probably seen their disappointment. “And?” their expressions seem to ask.

The Principles fail as creed because they’re too easy. Billions of people who literally would not want to be caught dead in a UU church can nod along with them. Take the Second Principle: “Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.” Does some other religion take a bold stand for *injustice* in human relations? People may argue about what “justice” means, but everybody is for it.

The principles are littered with feel-good terms like that: “spiritual growth,” “democratic process,” “search for truth and meaning,” “world community,” “peace,” “liberty.” If all Unitarian Universalism wants you to do is approve of such concepts, that’s not very demanding, is it?

So taken as a creed, the Principles define a religion just one step up from “Believe whatever you want.” Believe a few really easy things, and beyond that, believe whatever you want.

In addition to thinking that they describe a really wimpy religion, I have an even more serious objection to the Principles as a defining set of Unitarian Universalist beliefs: I don’t believe in them.

In fact, I don't think of them as beliefs at all. I think of them as visions.

The point of putting the Principles in the front of the hymnal and teaching them to our children isn't to assert their truth, or even to encourage you to nod along with the idea that they should be true. Unitarian Universalism is a commitment to envision a world in which the Principles have become true, to envision it so intensely and in such detail that it becomes a genuine possibility, and to join with others in making that possibility real

That's how the Seven Principles turn into a challenging spiritual path.

For some of the Principles the visionary aspect is obvious. The Sixth even has the word goal in it: "The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all." (Though even here, there's huge difference between agreeing that such a world community would be nice and committing yourself to envision it.) In the Second, it's implicit: Obviously, in the world as it stands, human relationships are not just, equitable, and compassionate, even among people with good intentions.... We aspire to such relationships; we don't claim that we have them.

But in at least three cases, the Principles seem to claim that particular things exist in the real world. The First asserts "the inherent worth and dignity of every person"; the Fifth, "the right of conscience"; and the Seventh, "the interdependent web of all existence."

Let me be blunt about this: none of those things exist. The Hubble telescope is never going to snap a picture of the interdependent web. Neither worth nor dignity nor the right of conscience is ever going to be observed under a microscope. What we are really doing when we affirm and promote the First, Fifth, and Seventh Principles is committing ourselves to imagine those visions into existence.

Imaging things into existence may seem like a oddly magical goal for a faith that is often criticized for its hardheaded rationalism, but this ambition is not as crazy as it sounds. Such things have happened before, but the success stories have a way of evaporating: after you imagine something into existence, it looks as if it has always been there.

So for example, it's hard for us today to put ourselves back into an eighteenth-century mindset and realize the full outrageousness of the Declaration of Independence's "self-evident" truth that "all men are created equal" and "are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights." Forget that Thomas Jefferson was a slave owner when he wrote these words. He could have been an abolitionist circuit rider and they would have been just as brazen. Whatever Enlightenment philosophers might have been writing, eighteenth-century people could look out their windows and see that these things were not true, much less self-evident. Everyone was born into a station in life, and the vast majority stayed there for the rest of their days. Commoners were not the king's equals. In the real world, you had whatever rights your betters deigned to grant you, and the Creator had little to do with it.

Jefferson's Declaration wasn't a statement of fact; it was an invitation to dream. What if we imagine human beings in such a way that inalienable rights are woven into their souls? What if we imagine the people as intermediaries between God and the government, rather than place the king and his church between the people and God? What will the world be like, if we start there?

By saying, “We hold these truths to be self-evident” Jefferson was really saying, “I have burned my bridges. I have committed myself to this vision, and if you assume something contrary to it I will not listen to you.”

In spite of all the ways it was contradicted in Jefferson’s life and the lives of practically everyone else in the eighteenth century, the Declaration of Independence’s vision was viral. Having seen it, you wanted others to see it. And when people gathered to envision it together, they wanted to manifest it in institutions. Today there are courtrooms on every continent where no one will look at you as a dreamer if you claim your freedom of speech or your right to practice your religion. They will even agree that their law merely recognizes a right that exists timelessly, prior to all laws and courtrooms.

That’s what it means to imagine something into existence. That’s what we’re trying to do.

So, do I believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person? No. I am committed to envisioning it. Together with others, I hope to imagine it so well, so convincingly, and so beautifully that the vision becomes viral and takes over the world.

That’s much harder than just believing the First Principle is true, because truths can take care of themselves. The difficulty of our task is why Unitarian Universalists need each other. If the point of Unitarian Universalism were just to believe the Principles, I could do that on my own. On a Sunday morning, I can believe just as well in my pajamas (over coffee and bagels with the newspapers spread all over my living room floor) as I can at a Unitarian Universalist worship service.

Or if it occurs to me that I would enjoy the company of others who believe similar things, I can get dressed and go to church. And if, on the way to my church, someone cuts me off in traffic, I can say, “Oh, I suppose he has inherent worth and dignity too.” It comes easily, because it is true on its own and needs nothing from me but my bare acknowledgement.

But the path of not believing—or believing that the First Principle is not true yet—is more challenging. I can’t do it by myself. If I’m trying to envision the Principles into existence, then I need my congregation and all the other congregations and all the help they can muster. And when that driver cuts me off, my religion call me not just to acknowledge the truth of his worth and dignity, but to really see it (in spite of the circumstances), because such acts of envisioning are the only reality the First Principle has.

So what do Unitarian Universalists believe? I don’t like my answers (or your) because it’s the wrong question. We’re not committed to beliefs, we’re committed to visions.

That’s much harder.