

A Principled Life: The Fifth UU Principle

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Our reading this morning, from Abraham Lincoln, was written in a time when the ideals of democracy were being sorely tested in the American conscience. Initially, he spoke these words in 1858, during the Lincoln-Douglas debates for a seat in the Senate; he used them again at his second inauguration in 1865. In the intervening years, Civil War erupted in the United States, pitting the northern and southern states against one another in a confrontation over slavery and the issues behind it – culture, economics, politics, and human rights. The reality of slavery became the issue that Lincoln and the people of his time had to address, since the founders of our nation could only bring themselves to acknowledge that “all men are created equal,” but could not incorporate that sentiment as a true reality for all the people of the young nation.

One tenet of democracy is the right of people to be heard and to vote, to participate in the process of deciding how things get constituted within that which they influence or participate. This year, being an election year, we hear the time-honored rhetoric of the democratic process – “the will of the people” - that politicians point to as an important factor in forming their viewpoints and initiatives.

I don't have any poll data about the "will of the people" in Lincoln's time, but I'm willing to bet that if the issue of slavery had been put to a popular vote, thousands of people would have remained in the service of masters, labeled and treated as property. I think the popular opinion of the people who were enfranchised to vote at that time, both in the North and in the South, would have supported the status quo, and slavery would have continued until some future time, when the issue resurfaced yet again and demanded to be addressed in the national discourse.

Lest we "glamorize" history in hindsight, let me be clear that the issue of slavery was multi-faceted and challenging, as are the issues of racism and economic parity for this nation's people today. There were many reasons that people chose to support or oppose slavery, some humanitarian, others economic, political, or social. Unitarians and Universalists of the time could be found in both camps. Some were slave holders and some were ardent abolitionists. Even Lincoln, himself, was not a proponent of full equality for the freed slaves. He did, however, hate slavery and want to see it abolished. Here's how he described his concerns in a speech from 1854:

"I cannot but hate it. I hate it because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself. I hate it because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world, enables the enemies of free institutions, with

plausibility, to taunt us as hypocrites, causes the real friends of freedom to doubt our sincerity, and especially because it forces so many really good men amongst ourselves into an open war with the very fundamental principles of civil liberty.”

Lincoln pointed out the dangers of slavery, from his point of view. His arguments point to the need, in his time, to engage in a dialog about the implications of the results of slavery on the nation’s soul and psyche. And, that’s where the leavening role of the right of conscience comes into play. Sometimes “the people” are wrong. There are times when what’s “popular” isn’t the best course to take, it isn’t the right thing to do, and it shouldn’t be allowed to prevail simply because a lot of people think it’s a good idea. Sometimes what everyone wants to do isn’t really good for everyone, in the long run, on more important levels of existence, beyond the immediate impact.

In the case of slavery, this was certainly the case. I’m sure you can think of other examples from our own country’s history; examples of times when the conscience of the nation needed to be roused and urged to speak up to right wrongs, chart a new course, and realign behavior to our more compelling and stated values and ideals. Some might say that now is a time like that in our nation.

Our Unitarian Universalist Principles include this important statement because of how we've chosen to govern ourselves as a people of faith within our congregations and communities. Once again we find, in the Fifth Principle, a set of two statements that work together to form a challenging, but important, approach for living out our values together as a congregation. As a people of faith, we have chosen to privilege the democratic process as our mode of congregational and denominational governance. Additionally, we value the right of each individual, and congregation, to hold to the voice of conscience and honor the right of people to speak from their conscience on matters that concern them.

The complex nature of living in a dynamic faith community is acknowledged in many of our Principles, some of which we've explored in earlier sermons in this series. In this case, it isn't either/or, it's both/and. We affirm and promote not only the use of the democratic process, but the right of conscience, as well. As a community, we agree to use democratic approaches in our governance. Within that community, we are called to participate with our consciences fully engaged, so that the course we chart together is accountable to our deeply held values.

For those of you new to Unitarian Universalism, our Purpose, Principles and Sources represent foundational statements of what this

religious denomination finds important and strives to demonstrate in daily practice. While not a creed or a statement of belief, per se, the Seven Principles represent a common set of values which bind us together as a faith community. You can find the full document referenced on the back cover of your order of service. As you can see, the exact wording of The Fifth Principle states that we, as congregations, affirm and promote “the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and within society at large.”

This week, I attended a conference on the work of the Interfaith Council of the South Bay. The keynote speaker was Rev. Phil Lawson, a retired Methodist minister currently serving as the Interfaith Program Director for East Bay Housing Organizations, who describes himself as a lifelong “worker for justice.” Along with his brother, the Rev. Jim Lawson, he was active in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Before and after that decade, he’s worked to, in his words, “help the United States become a democracy.”

For over 60 years, he’s worked on causes related to justice because, he says, he wants to see our society, our institutions, and our people act in ways that are truly representative of our stated values. He sees his work in social justice as his effort to save the soul of the United States.

He's an inspiring speaker, and I'd like to share one of his observations with you because it's related to today's topic. In Rev. Lawson's view, the opposite of slavery is not freedom, but rather community. He says that freedom is a necessary element for engaging in community; we have to be able to come together as equals if we are to be able to create a true community together. Slavery divided people from each other; the oppression of the institution split families, denied relationships between people, stopped discourse between individuals and groups, and disrupted peoples' ability to coalesce into true community, with each other and with society at large.

And, in Rev. Lawson's view, one of life's ultimate challenges is learning how to live together in community; finding ways to foster an environment that supports the full development of our human potential in positive, life-affirming ways. We have to learn how to get along with one another, how to hear and acknowledge and include every single voice in the shaping of life in relationship, in community.

Our Unitarian Universalist Principles provide some of the guidelines for how we choose to engage in this process in our community. The Fifth principle tells us that we value the process of governing ourselves democratically, seeking the input and involvement of all of us in shaping the

decisions which affect our congregational community. It also tells us that we affirm each individual's right to consult and be informed by the promptings of their conscience, what they innately know to be right and true, and to act from that place in living their lives and being a part of the larger community.

We carry out the democratic process in the governance of this Fellowship in many ways, including making financial reports, Board minutes, and other information about the community's operations available to our Members, Friends, and visitors. Members elect their Board of Trustees representatives. We hold an annual congregational meeting to share information on the status of the Fellowship's funds and activities. We encourage discussion and participation at Board and other meetings.

Our commitment to the democratic process is a positive one, though it can sometimes have its challenges at the congregational level, just as it does at the national level. For example, decisions can take time to make, because we are committed to involving people and getting their input. If this process goes too far, we find ourselves involved in seemingly endless discussions that don't seem to lead to decisive action.

Or, we can find ourselves making, and then remaking, decisions because of people's changing opinions or a desire to make sure that everyone gets an outcome that they "like."

The democratic process gives each of us a voice, but it doesn't insure that any of us gets our way, at least not all of the time. We agree to make opportunities available for input and discussion; we covenant to listen to one another and to consider each other's opinions and viewpoints respectfully. Then, hopefully, because of our respect for the democratic process, when the decision is made, we move forward in solidarity and commitment together.

In congregations, as in the larger national democratic process, it can sometimes seem that selected people are "more equal than others;" for a variety of reasons. It may appear that their opinion or voice has more influence or impact than that of others on creating an outcome or making a decision. It would be naïve to ignore the role that power – of all kinds – plays in even the democratic process. I believe we consciously look for ways to work constructively with power and influence in this congregation, but it is a part of the equation in communities and groups that work together to accomplish common goals. It pays to keep an awareness of the dynamics of power in our view as we engage in making decisions as a Fellowship.

As it also pays to make space for the wisdom of conscience, that small voice within that prompts us to follow our values, be true to our convictions, and speak truth to power when it is necessary. The Fifth Principle provides a sort of “checks and balances” approach for governance in our denomination, in our congregations. It is a part of our spiritual practice in community to learn to work with the dynamic tensions at play in this Principle.

I’d like to tackle the closing phrase of the Fifth Principle for a moment, too. We talk here about using the democratic process not only in our own congregations, but also in society at large. The concept of congregations is pretty clear – we know what that means. It means the groups of people, like this Fellowship, who have joined together to form a community of faith within the Unitarian Universalist family.

But what about this concept of “society at large?” Does that mean the United States? We’re a denomination that has a larger presence in the world than just the United States. Does it mean that we should be advocates for the use of the democratic process in the world at large?

Prolific writer and religious scholar Karen Armstrong has written extensively about Christianity, Judaism, and Islam in her various books, including *The Battle for God* and *The Great Transformation*. While there

are those who find her theories controversial, I think she has made some interesting observations about the links between culture, religion, and political structures that merit consideration.

Armstrong postulates that the rise of democracy is intricately linked with the phenomena of modernity. She takes readers back to the 16th century, to talk about the rise of a new kind of civilization in Europe, and eventually America, that moved beyond the constraints of the agrarian economy. What we now label as the “modern era” was built on science, technology, progress, and the constant reinvestment of capital.

As these people moved further and further away from being tied to the land, the cultural, political, and economic changes around them demanded new sets of skills, abilities, and thinking.

For example, in earlier times, there was little need for and scant encouragement for free thought or creativity. Agrarian cultures tend to accomplish the task of maintaining daily life in roughly consistent patterns for many millennia. People didn't need to be literate, for the knowledge that needs to be transferred between the generations is acquired by hands-on experience within the family or community. These are often primarily oral cultures, with a rich heritage of story-telling.

Contrast this with the needs of modern culture. To deal with technology and science, you need a more highly education populace. That leads to public education, and an emphasis on science, innovation, creativity, and experimentation. People who are more educated desire and are better prepared to be involved and engaged in the political process. As the economy of progress needs more and more people to function, people become more and more capable of free thought and free speech. As they become more educated, they demand greater freedom. Modernity has two important qualities: 1) Independence – a high regard for political, religious, and intellectual freedom, and 2) Innovation – a need to constantly be inventing something new.

The powers that be, or those who have traditionally held power, find this, to say the least, challenging to deal with. When you have power and privilege, you generally enjoy it and want to keep it. We can look back in our own history to find examples of this struggle, as the United States sought to emerge as a free nation and moved into living a day-to-day reality of what the founders imagined in the Constitution. It has been a 200 year plus experiment in learning, and maturing, as a democratic republic. And, I think most of us would agree, we still don't always get it right.

Author Armstrong asks us, as a nation and as individuals, to remember this dynamic play of modernity, and the struggle to emerge as a democratic system, as we interact with the larger world. While much of the world is modern, it is also true that in those areas where we experience the greatest challenges in foreign policy, we are dealing with nations that, by and large, are not fully modernized, at least not in their economic, political and cultural structures. They may have cell phones, but they don't have the underpinnings of modernity in place.

We have also in world history, multiple examples of the outcomes of colonization – those situations where a conquering nation seeks to implement the hasty modernization of the conquered. The process of modernity has always had victims – for example, African-American slaves, from our earlier discussion. Progress for some often means sorrow for others.

Democracies take time to emerge. They take participation, education, investment, and transition to reach eventual transformation. Which leads me back to the Fifth Principle. What are we implying when we advocate the use of the democratic process, and the right of conscience, in society at large?

As with any of our Principles, it is important to remember that these statements of our collective values are not an ala carte menu. We use them in conjunction and in relationship with the others.

Therefore, advocacy for the use of the democratic process, for UUs, must be done respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person. This asks us to not privilege our way of doing things simply because it is our way, and therefore, better. To me, this indicates that it might not be in the best interests of every group of people to impose or expect an embrace of democracy, if they are culturally, economically, politically, or intellectually prepared for to make this transition.

We have other Principles that we aspire to see applied broadly in the world community, and we'll talk about that more next month when we talk about the Sixth Principle. However, in this month's consideration of the Fifth Principle, I suggest that the term "society at large" should come with some caveats.

Let's go back to the 1860s, where this sermon began. We know how the early struggles of this story ended. Eventually, Lincoln and the people of this nation used the right of conscience and aspects of the democratic process to put an end to slavery, and the nation continued as the UNITED States. Their efforts led to change, not enough and not complete, but change,

nonetheless. As people of conscience, in a democratic nation, we still have work to do. As Unitarian Universalists, our Principles remind us that it is still our work to do, as people of conviction and faith who strive to live our values faithfully and with conviction.

May it be so.