

## **A Principled Life: The Third UU Principle**

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Today's sermon continues our look at the seven foundational Principles of Unitarian Universalism. Our Third Principle, in which we express our affirmation for acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations, exists in the context of the remaining Principles, and yet challenges us to some specific actions within our Fellowship community. I hope to "unpack" these affirmations today and help explain what I think it would look like if we lived acceptance and spiritual encouragement in our denomination.

Those of you who are new to Unitarian Universalism need to know that 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 do represent a set of common values which bind us together. You can find the full document referenced on the back cover of your order of service, or on our website and in other UU publications.

I chose to use the Seven Principles as the basis for this series of sermons because, in accordance with the Bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association of congregations, the Purpose, Principles and Sources are reviewed periodically for possible changes or additions. A Commission on Appraisal of our national Association selects and researches issues of deeper meaning and better practice to UU every three years. They are now engaged in a process of gathering input, information, and suggestions from UUs across the country on the Principles. Every congregation, every individual Unitarian Universalist, is invited to have input into this process.

To that end, after the service today, we'll be sharing our reactions and suggestions regarding the UU Principles, Purpose, and Sources in this congregation's response to the work of the Commission. In November, at an introductory Forum, we talked about what the Commission on Appraisal is looking for, and started sharing some of our ideas about possible revisions or inclusions. Today, we will go into more depth about providing input and feedback for the review process. I hope you plan to be a part of the discussion here in the Sanctuary at 12:30.

For today, let's have a look at Principle number three. In it, we UUs "covenant to affirm and promote acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations." In comparison with the others, you'll notice that this Principle is a bit different in structure and composition than its partners. Here we have two somewhat disparate objectives combined into one Principle statement – one: to accept one another, and two: to encourage each other in spiritual growth. The remainder of the Seven address a single topic or include related concepts. This is the only one where the two seemingly disparate elements are stuck together in a single statement.

I don't know exactly how these Principle statements were formulated, but the arrangement of Principle number three leads me to imagine that it was the one that got wordsmithed at the end of a long meeting. Picture it – you're part of the group that is tasked with making sense out of Unitarian Universalism and crafting a statement of Principle. You and your colleagues have been at it all day. You've made good progress, but there are two important concepts left on the table. You and all of the other

participants are tired and ready to call it a day. Finally, someone says, “Look, we agree that they’re both important. So, let’s just lump them together and slip ‘em into the middle of the pile. Problem solved and we can all go home.” Voila! Principle number three!

Well, maybe that isn’t really what happened! And, actually, I think that these two elements actually do support each other in an important way. Let’s take a look at them.

From the beginning of Principle Three, we learn about our UU commitment to accept one another. Since we know that we don’t exercise our Principles in isolation, and we’ve already affirmed the inherent worth and dignity of others in Principle One, why (we might ask) are we also pointing out that we vow to “accept” others, as well?

To me, this is about our vision of being together in the beloved community of our congregations, and by extension, in the larger world. And, what it’s saying is that in our relationships, we will strive to accept one another. Not just putting up with someone, although we secretly we may think they’re silly or muddle-headed or worse. All of us know we are capable of putting up with someone for at least short periods of time, but that doesn’t do much to create a mutually supportive and embracing community.

So, Principle Three doesn’t say “we covenant to put up with each other,” it says “acceptance.” It’s not mere tolerance, but full acceptance that’s called for - recognizing each other fully and acknowledging the right of every one of us to be included in this community of faith, if our conscience tells us that this is our religious home.

Some examples: Tolerance is you can come to my church, acceptance is you can sit in the seat next to me. Tolerance is you can buy a house in my neighborhood, acceptance is we’ll invite you to our barbecue and when you bring some food we aren’t familiar with, we’ll cheerfully give it a try. Tolerance is you have a right to say whatever you want, acceptance is I’ll listen and give the truths of your position as much value as I give my own truth. Acceptance flows out of our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of all. Acceptance in Principle Three is a matter of degree. This Principle challenges us to bring our relationship with others closer and into a more intimate dance than described by mere tolerance, or putting up with.

This acceptance is not only about giving someone else recognition, but also giving them credibility. This Principle calls us to not only acknowledge the presence of others, including others who may be different from us in myriad ways, but to give them the same credence and standing we give to ourselves and others we define as “like us.”

In Western cultures, this is actually a form of radical thought. Western cultures have a history and practice of seeing differences, as opposed to similarities, and defining anything different as “wrong,” “primitive,” or “less valuable than.” If we are born into and reared in the dominant culture, even if we have consciously worked to eject this kind of thinking from our minds, we are programmed to have a tendency to discern difference and to then consider that difference as deficiency in relationship to our ways of thinking, being, and doing. Different is not necessarily deficient.

We have been culturally trained to see our ways as better, preferred, as the model for how people “should” be. And, we’ve been so well trained in this mental model that not only will we see our own cultural patterns as better, but we will individually privilege our own ways and thoughts and preferences over those of any other individual.

And that makes fully living this Third Principle a challenge for many of us. To move ourselves to a place of radical acceptance, we must challenge ourselves to

recognize differences as plausible, honorable, and credible alternatives to our ways of thinking, doing, believing, and living. We have to make a place for different.

Different is not deficient, it's just different. If we fully embrace the challenge to extend acceptance to one another, we have to consciously examine the ways in which we privilege ourselves in relationship to them. And that is a rigorous process. It requires awareness and willingness. It takes commitment and hard work. It demands examination and consideration and reflection. It's hard work. And, ultimately, it requires us to change the ways we think, the ways we feel, the ways we act, and the ways we interact with one another.

To me, this need for a rigorous process in moving toward acceptance is the clue to why these two apparently disparate statements are included in the same Principle.

Because to do the truly radical work of acceptance of one another, I believe we have to invest in our own spiritual growth. While we may, at times, yearn to exist in a world where everyone agrees and sees things through the same lenses that we do, in truth we live in a complex, complicated, and conflicted environment, filled with tensions, paradoxes, and conundrums.

Our challenge in this environment is to remain engaged and attentive, open and in relationship with others and with the world around us. Certainly, the temptation is there to withdraw from the confusion and chaos that life can sometimes present us with. Some people choose to fight, to adopt a position that demands that things, thoughts, and actions be done only their way. We see the results of our inclinations to fight or flight all around us.

In truth, the best strategy in complexity is finding the place from which we can respond with curiosity and acceptance. Coming to this realization has been a process of growth for me. Over 13 years ago, Carl and I worked for the same company, where we were continually reminded to “embrace ambiguity” as we learned to deal with the new complexities and confusions of a changing workplace. One day, in frustration at hearing this message one more time, and not truly being sure of how to respond, I turned to Carl in a staff meeting and whispered, “I’d be happy to embrace ambiguity if it would only stand still.” He tells me that this was one of the first things that endeared me to him – our shared mystification at what to do in the face of complexity and uncertainty!

What I learned over the intervening years is that the way through confusion includes accepting diversity as beneficial. It's developing the understanding that we can learn to not only tolerate ambiguity and complexity, but accept it and embrace it. While it doesn't stand still, but we can learn to dance with it.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “with consistency, a great soul has simply nothing to do.” He's telling us that if everything and everyone are always the same, we have no challenge, no spark, no vitality. That would indicate to me that in our modern circumstances, our souls have plenty to keep them occupied, challenged and alive.

Which leads us to the second part of Principle Three – the encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations. What kind of a spirituality will help us love the contradictions and embrace and accept the complexities of being with other people in a multifaceted world? What kind of religious community will be a place where we can explore what it means to live with uncertainty and paradox?

I think it is one that helps each of us expand the capacity of our soul and the strength of our spirit, yet still maintain our unique personal integrity and individuality.

Unitarian theologian Bernhard Loomer has written about this kind of spiritual growth in his thoughts on process theology. Process theologians contend that the universe is always growing in size and complexity, and that as the universe grows, so does God and so must we. In his later life, Loomer was a member of the Berkeley UU church, and he was fond of asking people, “What is the size of your soul?” What he was asking people to consider is the ability of their soul to grow and expand and stretch when life throws more and more contradictions and complexity in their path.

Like many of you, I was raised in a traditional Christian church, where I learned that developing spiritually was a process of growing closer to God in a vertical line from me, down here, to heaven, up there. My ideas about spiritual growth have changed a lot over the years, which is one of the reasons I now am a Unitarian Universalist. Now, I see spiritual growth as a call to expand my soul in every direction at once, not just in a vertical path aimed upward. Spiritual growth, to me, is a call for us to develop the spaciousness of our spirits, expanding their volume, capacity, and resilience while maintaining our unique personal integrity.

My visual image for that is opening the embrace of my soul, allowing myself to allow in and love more and more of life’s paradox and complexity, it’s about keeping my heart supple and open to the new. The alternative is keeping your soul constricted, which has, I think, serious mental health implications. In the words of Carl Jung, “neurosis is a narrowing of (one’s) spiritual horizons.”

The kind of spiritual growth I’m suggesting for creating acceptance takes attention and practice. Certainly, there are aspects of spiritual practice that we can do on our own, but the most effective way to make practice into habit is to have the support of others in the process. That’s why so many “self-help” programs include some kind of group – it’s easier for us to make progress toward our goals when we have the encouragement and accountability of being in community with others.

The great Unitarian minister, A. Powell Davies, said that religion “is the opportunity to grow a soul.” Perhaps a more humanist way to say this is that religion is the opportunity to become more human. As a congregation, as people who strive to live congruently with our Principles, we need each other to encourage us to keep trying, to be open to learning and changing. In order to offer each other acceptance for who we truly are, to keep us involved in exploring who we are so that we can, in turn, know others, we need to keep engaging in the work of growing and expanding spiritually.

When we are in a group of people where we know we are seen as worthy and are accepted, we are more likely to allow ourselves to change and be changed. And that’s one of the reasons we go to church. It’s part of the reason that these two seemingly disparate concepts – acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations – are so neatly nestled together in Unitarian Universalist Principle Three. Because they really aren’t so disparate after all, and it’s right where they need to be.

Blessed be.