

***The Eighth Principle***  
**The Rev. Annie Foerster**  
**February 1, 2009**

They are tinkering with our Principles. Not our individually held, personal principles of faith or doubt, of honor or judgment, of peace or fear. They are tinkering with the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism. *They* are the Commission on Appraisal.

I trust from experience that you know more about the Principles than you do about the Commission on Appraisal, so let me give you a little background before I go on talking about tinkering. *They* are a nine-member elected body of the Unitarian Universalist Association and their mission is, in part, “. . . to provoke deep reflection and to evoke timely, creative transformation of Unitarian Universalism, our congregations and the Unitarian Universalist Association.” They are in some way like our own Advisory Team, whose missions statement is, “To serve the Board as a think-tank regarding growth planning: to identify and study related issues, consider alternatives and recommend changes.” The Commission on Appraisal also considers alternatives and recommends changes, the difference being their larger scope the greater number of people who receive their written reports.

One of the Commission’s earliest reports, in 1936, was titled *Unitarians Face a New Age*; it followed the declaration of the Humanist Manifesto, much of whose planning had been done by Unitarians. In 1975 the Commission studied the effects of the 1961 merger of Unitarians and Universalists into a single association of churches. Throughout the years they have reported on such diverse issues as lay leadership, representation at General Assembly, racial justice, religious education, the professional ministry; congregational polity, the meaning of membership, and, most recently, our theological diversity.

And now, at the behest of the UUA board and the UUA president, they are tinkering with our Principles. As part of their study, they have asked congregations to tell them what is good and what is not so good about the principles and their related documentation. Last fall, after two years of study, they issued suggested changes, which were published in the Winter issue of the *The World*. The proposed changes will be on the agenda for discussion and vote at the upcoming General Assembly in Salt Lake City.

When the current version of the Principles was adopted in 1985, it was suggested that we review them every 15 to 20 years to see if they still fit. Obviously, we got busy with other things and we missed the deadline, but only slightly. Those of you who have become UUs during the past 20 years might have thought that the Principles were ancient, immutable, sacred, sheltered from change. But, no. They are recent and part of a living document; a part of the Association’s bylaws. Their incarnation immediately prior to 1985 came with the merger of Unitarians and Universalists, a merger thought by many in 1961 to be long overdue, but marked with struggle, with debate and argument and failed resolutions. Each separate denomination before the merger had its own history of trying to define its core principles. *Things Commonly Believed Among Us*, was just one of several versions in the American Unitarian Association’s history.

I don’t mean this to be a history lesson, but while I am filling in the background for you so you can understand my own proposed changes, let me dispel a common misunderstanding. The Principles are not statements of faith for individuals, although they often end up being the basis for individual conversation and theological thought. They are the covenant among the UU congregations, because we are an association of churches, not persons. We are the second-order inheritors of that covenant.

If you are like me, you have long intended to memorize the Principles in order; and if you are like me, you have not yet gotten around to it. It helps to remember the order if you know that the Principles were designed to read from the individual to the universal. The first principle is about persons; the second about relationships; the third and fourth about spiritual growth and the search for truth and meaning in our congregations; the fifth is about conscience and the democratic process; the sixth regards world community; and the seventh, the interdependent web of all existence. Go ahead and memorize them, if you wish. The Commission decided not to change them that much. They suggest a word or two here, a deletion or so there; some explanatory language to support each; and a narrative version of the Sources to replace the list of bullets. Tinkering; but deep tinkering, thoughtful tinkering. This process was not done in a vacuum, nor is it simply wordsmithing.

I meant to be one of those who responded to the Commission, but I missed all the deadlines. I did think about it though, but in my usual obstinate manner, I knocked on the back door. Instead of considering what words I might change, what ideas I might retune, what clarifications I might make, I asked myself, "What's missing? What hasn't been there for me to support my own Unitarian Universalist personal theology?" I asked myself, "If I were allowed to add an eighth principle, what would it be? If I were in charge of naming the Sources and considering consultants for making changes, to whom would I appeal?"

What popped into my mind were William Wordsworth's lines, *The world is too much with us; late and soon, getting and spending, we lay waste to our powers. . . . We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!*

Wordsworth was speaking about our separation from nature when he prophesied, *We are out of tune*; when he lamented, *I'd rather be a Pagan suckled in a creed outworn*. But for me, his words hold meaning. Though I am speaking of a separation, not from nature, but from our inner selves, our mystic center, his words hold truth for me. I offer two examples of what I mean.

When I first heard the seventh principle – *respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part* -- I celebrated what I understood to be a cosmic perception. I beheld it as a spiritual proclamation of a personal experience and belief, that I am one with all creation, no more, no less. But I was literally brought back to earth when I realized that for most Unitarian Universalists it is a rallying cry for the planet's environment, a plea to care for our planet. I have no issues with this philosophy, but when the world is too much with us, I fear it obscures that which is beyond this world; it limits our view of what is and might be.

I have always been fond of Principle three: *Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth*. The Commission has decided to change that to encouragement of spiritual growth, and I feel I'm losing something. It's a subtle difference, but clearly more worldly. In the newly worded principle, spiritual growth is no longer a goal, but a path, a byway, not on the main route. We support it when it happens, but, don't worry about it if it doesn't occur to you. *We lay waste our powers*, if we make this change; powers we have only begun to experience and explore as a denomination.

So what would I recommend if I were on the Commission? I would recommend an Eighth Principle, one that *would* be an individual marker of faith, a signpost for seekers and believers. From the specific to the global is not enough is not enough for me. There is beyond to explore. The Eight Principles then would delineate our faith from the specific to the *cosmic*, because now the world is too much with us. I would reserve the Eighth Principle for all those elements of faith we have longed to hear in this religious community in which we choose to live and love and have our being.

This, in the Eighth Principle, is where I would have the bylaws affirm and support – or, in the new language of the Commission, honor and uphold – this is where I would have us explore ways of being in this world *and* beyond.

Your list will be different, but this is what I find lacking: Where in our Principles does it suggest that we should strive to be more joyful? That we should laugh, and dance and sing, and not take ourselves so seriously? It is not for nothing that we have been dubbed in the past as God's frozen people.

And where does it say that we should be more deeply pensive, more broadly thoughtful, feeling before we speak, not just being more rational? Where does it suggest that there is bodily real estate we can inhabit in addition to our brains?

Where does it suggest that we learn anew a better way to grieve -- how to acknowledge our losses of innocence, of love, of life -- grieving first for ourselves, and only then for others, so that we may have that compassion we so boldly seek?

Where does it tell us how to look inward, to find silence and peace and inner wisdom and unverifiable knowing; and when and how to look out so that we no longer miss all there is to see when we look with our eyes and our hearts wide open?

Where does it say that having and making choices are good, but that when we make them, we must not forget we have responsibility in their outcomes and consequences?

Where in our literature does it support our being? Six of the seven principles clearly come down on the side of our doing. Wouldn't it seem fair that numbers one and eight might talk about our being?

Where does it instruct us to speak with one another as gloriously imperfect human creatures, because when we speak from behind the armor of our masks of perfection – and I freely admit that I am a mask-maker of the first order -- we miss so much of one another? And shouldn't that be part of our covenant?

And what of death? We seldom speak of this except as it has happened to someone else, because the world is too much with us. Where does our faith welcome the miracle that brought us into this existence and makes leaving it such a bittersweet experience?

Where is it written? There is currently no place to promote these questions public discussions among us.

When the Commission on Appraisal first began to study our Principles, they asked for feedback. Their deadline was October 16, 2008. Fifteen hundred people responded. As I said, I was not one of them. But still I have a question: *Who did they ask?* This is legitimate question because the commission is suggesting considerable changes to the sources. So I want to know who their sources were.

This is the part in the Commission's recommendations with which I disagree most. They have taken this lovely list, liturgically written, and dumbed it down. *Wisdom and beauty*, they suggest, *may be expressed in many forms: in poetry and prose, in story and song, in metaphor and myth, in drama and dance, in fabric and painting, in scripture and music, in drawing and sculpture, in public ritual and solitary practice.* Don't they think we know that? Does it really expand our understanding to make such a prosaic list? It leads me to question just who it was who responded. Who were their sources for the changing of the Sources?

Why not, I should have responded when I didn't, why not ask the children what they think while they still see the world blessed with magic?

Why not ask those in love who see the world in such beautiful and misty colors.

Why not ask those who are poor what they think is important when their lives are not cluttered with things?

Why not ask the lonely or the poor of health, because they know what is missing from their lives?

Why not ask poets or dreamers, because they have been asking these questions for centuries?

Why not ask air-passengers just as the wheels touch down what it means not to have the world too much with us; what was on their minds in high altitudes?

Why not ask deep sea divers and space walkers for the same reasons?

Why not ask those who are deprived of the worlds we all know by virtue of physical constraints and neurological anomalies?

Why not ask those of vivid imaginations, not encumbered by gravity of either definition?

If we are going to name the sources of our faith – or rename them – the sources that brought us together, that encouraged each of us to become Unitarian Universalists, and more specifically, to join this particular congregation at this particular time, shouldn't we be casting our nets in a wider circle?

I know from experience that many of you don't agree with much of what I have said here this morning, and some of you don't even have a point of reference for what I've been saying. I know that I lost some of you at the words *mystic center*; and that others will say *this world is all we know; all we can know*. I know my list of things that might be included in our Principles isn't the same as your list. But of the things currently believed in common among us, can we not include the assumption that our Principles are some kind of personal touchstone, have some importance among us? Can't we agree that we ought to think about them from time to time, ponder their meaning, admit to their shortcoming and their difficulties? Can we agree on that?

If we could start there, this is what I propose as a solution to the wise decision to tinker with our Principles from time to time. How about if we numbered them in their expansion from individual and specific, to global and general? Numbered them: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven -- and after the seventh, we would have the number eight, followed by a blank space. What if we make it the empty chair in our small group circles, waiting for the welcomed stranger who might fill it? What if we make it the place-setting for Elijah who might join our circle supper or our solitary supper this evening? What if we make it a place to affirm and promote -- or honor and uphold -- our belief, as Longfellow said it, that *revelation is not sealed*; to honor our hope that truth and wisdom, ever elusive, are not entirely out of our grasp. What if we make it a place that in its emptiness says, *this one's for you, baby? This one's for you and you and you and me*.

What if we were to think more deeply about such things; not what we don't believe, but what we do; not what we can't believe, but what we might consider?