

“Article II Part 1: Not Enough Verbs”

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

Rev. Sam Trumbore January 8, 2023

Call to Celebration

Welcome to Albany Unitarian Universalist. My name is Rev. Sam Trumbore and I serve as lead minister of this congregation.

We cast a wide welcome to all, affirming the light you’ve brought with you this morning. May our service help that light shine brighter amplifying our collective light for the benefit of all.

Our theme for January is “Finding Our Center.” This can be an individual search as well as a collective search for a center.

My focus this morning will be on finding the center of Unitarian Universalism. The Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly created a commission to do just that by reviewing the definition of its institutional identity. That identity is formally written in our bylaws as Article 2 which states the purpose of the organization. This is the location of our 7 principles and 6 sources. But that isn’t all that is in Article 2. It also has

1. the purposes of the Unitarian Universalist Association
2. a commitment not to discriminate, and
3. a statement of Freedom of Belief.

The center of UU Identity can be found right here.

But is it really who we *really* are today? Is there anything missing? Could they be improved? Could they be written in more effective language while preserving the spirit of the current language?

The Article 2 Study Commission has been asking these questions for two years and has proposed new language that I will consider next week. But before we look at any changes, we need to spend some time examining what is now the center of Unitarian Universalism.

In the spirit of appreciation for the hard work done to create what we currently have and of curiosity about how it might be even better, more inclusive, more inspirational, more energizing, more accountable, more transforming, let us join together in the spirit of life.

Reading

ARTICLE II Principles and Purposes

Section C-2.1. Principles.

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

The living tradition which we share draws from many sources:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- Words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;
- Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.

Section C-2.2. Purposes.

The Unitarian Universalist Association shall devote its resources to and exercise its corporate powers for religious, educational and humanitarian purposes. The primary purpose of the Association is to serve the needs of its member congregations, organize new congregations, extend and strengthen Unitarian Universalist institutions and implement its principles.

Section C-2.3. Non-discrimination.

The Association declares and affirms its special responsibility, and that of its member congregations and organizations, to promote the full participation of persons in all of its and their activities and in the full range of human endeavor without regard to race, ethnicity, gender, disability, affectional or sexual orientation, age, language, citizenship status, economic status, or national origin and without requiring adherence to any particular interpretation of religion or to any particular religious belief or creed.

Section C-2.4. Freedom of Belief.

Nothing herein shall be deemed to infringe upon the individual freedom of belief which is inherent in the Universalist and Unitarian heritages or to conflict with any statement of purpose, covenant, or bond of union used by any congregation unless such is used as a creedal test.

Sermon

At the Unitarian Universalist Association Board meeting January 19th, I will receive and bring back to you for your consideration the second proposal to revise Article II of the Bylaws. I'll be exploring it in my January 22nd Service and sharing a copy with you in Windows. We've already had a chance to see the first draft of the proposed revision from the General Assembly's Article II Study Commission that encountered significant resistance. Some are asking, "Why are we doing this? I'm fine with them as they are."

One reason we are considering revising Article II is because the bylaws say they should be reviewed every 15 years. Just because such a review is suggested doesn't mean we *should* change them. Opposition is already forming a group called "Save the Principles." I think we can all agree that the current language passed in 1985 has stood the test of time, with a few tweaks, and become central to UU identity today.

"If you'd like to change them, you'd better have a darn good reason," the opponents of change shout!

That will be my challenge today is to give you some darn good reasons why we should revise them.

The original Article II language developed at the time of the 1961 merger of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America was hard fought because of the significant differences between Unitarian and Universalist belief and practice. Even though we had a lot in common, our historical understanding of Christianity was very different. Unitarians were anti-trinitarian but Universalists were not. Universalists embraced universal salvation whereas Unitarians grew out of the Anabaptist tradition that called followers to imitate Christ. Unitarians rallied around Channing's call for character development, a call for works not just faith. By the middle of the twentieth century, both traditions welcomed those who didn't embrace Christianity, even Humanists and atheists, but the Unitarians were wary of the Universalist continuing attachment to Christian faith and practice. Article II was crafted to make room for both without rejecting either by focusing on shared values rather than shared beliefs.

What made our newly merged tradition different from any other religious tradition wasn't our rejection of a creed. The Religious Society of Friends has no creed neither do the Jehovah's Witnesses. What makes us different isn't the use of congregational polity, the anti-authoritarian governance approach that makes each religious organization independent of each other, self-governing and self-supporting. The Baptists use it as do the Quakers, and the Churches of Christ.

What sets us apart is our unwillingness to canonize any text as authoritative for our congregations. We find inspiration in world scripture as well as philosophy, science, literature, art, and poetry. Some might want to canonize Shakespeare, Alfred North Whitehead, Thoreau, Whitman, or Mary

Oliver for that matter. I'm deeply grateful to go to the Tao, to Buddhist Suttas, to Rumi's poetry, to the Upanishads, just to name a few places to bring you inspiration on Sunday morning. We trust the capacity for discernment in each one of us to guide us toward what is good, true, and beautiful. Not that we can't be deluded, confused, and misled. It is our evolving communal understanding and witness that can serve as a rudder to guide our journey through life.

We like to refer to what we do as a part of a living tradition unbound to the past and trusting the dawning future more. As such, our forming and reforming identity is not locked in language that doesn't change. It finds new words and expressions in each generation. Each new generation recognizes limitations in the old and proposes adaptations for a new day.

This is true of Article II. Here are some examples of how Article II has changed:

- In 1963, Article II had language like this in the principles:
 - To cherish and spread the universal truths ... in the Judeo-Christian heritage as love to God and love to man...
 - To affirm, defend and promote the supreme worth of every human personality, the dignity of man...
 - ...world community founded on the ideals of brotherhood, justice and peace;
- In 1967 the first non-discrimination clause was added.
- In 1972 the constitution and bylaws were consolidated in one document. The constitution parts were called "c" bylaws and had special treatment. Article II is a c-bylaw.
- The current format of Article II passed in 1985 came through the efforts of the UU Women's Federation starting in the early 1980's to eliminate sexist language you heard from the founding 1961 documents.
- 1994 the GA delegates added the sixth Earth Centered Spirituality source.
- 2009 major changes were offered that rewrote the sources and added other language. It failed in a close vote.
- 2017 the last change of the language was the source referring to "prophetic women and men." It was changed to "prophetic people" to include a wider expression of gender identity.

Except for the major work done in the 1980's, Article II hasn't changed much since then, but you can recognize in all the changes since 1961, signs of changing understanding of ourselves and our times.

Now let's explore some of the concerns that are motivating the changes you'll hear about in two weeks. The concerns I'll be discussing are not wordsmithing changes like changing prophetic women and men to prophetic people. They speak about larger issues that address the whole of the sources and principles.

One complaint about our current Article II language that stands out for me has been that there are not enough verbs. There isn't enough call to action and transformation.

Following this critique, I've done my own analysis of Principles and Sources verbs. Here is what I found in the text.

The first verb we encounter is “to covenant.” We use the word covenant in Unitarian Universalism as an agreement for how we aspire to be together in community. It sets a definition and a direction for positive relations among us and provides a way to get back on track after relationship problems have been recognized and addressed. Covenant is a relationship sustaining tool rather than a punishing legal maneuver to decide who is right and who is wrong.

The covenant says, as Unitarian Universalists, we “affirm and promote” the principles. “To promote” is an active verb to advocate for our values in the world as articulated in the principles.

Now let’s look deeper at the verbs in the principles themselves.

There are no verbs in the first two. The first defines the inherent worth and dignity of every person. The second defines how we should relate to each other with justice, equity and compassion. The first two verbs show up in the third, to accept and encourage each other to spiritual growth. This is a soft nudge toward a personal development focus. The same could be said for the fourth principle where we find the verb to search for truth and meaning. The fifth has a passive voice discussing “the use” of the democratic process. The goal of world community is also passively hoped for. Our engagement with the interdependent web of all existence is a little tenuous. The verb is, “respect.” For me that is more of a cautionary verb. I respect authorities like police officers because I know they can throw me in jail if I don’t respect a red light and run it or do something else that is socially unacceptable. I also respect the power of weather in winter and take precautions against being stuck outside in the cold. The 2009 changes to Article II suggested that word be changed to “reverence for.” That is a very different verb to approach the interdependent web of existence ... of which we are a part.

The verbs in the sources are also quite interesting. They all are acting upon us. The sources move us, challenge us, inspire us, call us to respond, counsel us, warn us, celebrate life and instruct us. They are inward directed influences, except for the great commandment to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbor as ourselves, live in harmony with the rhythms of nature and confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love. These sources have more powerful verbs than are found in the principles!

The separation of our principles from our sources in our current Article II is very relevant to the discontent that is driving change. The powerful verbal directions from our sources to us don’t actively translate into our common values because we don’t agree to draw from the same sources. If I am a pagan I may not feel compelled to respond to the love of a Judeo-Christian God. Humanists may warn us against it as an idolatry of the mind and spirit. The powerful verbs of our sources are quarantined to the subscribers to that source who are not required to make a commitment to them.

This leads to the second rap against the current language of the Article II. It is too focused on the individual rather than the collective. The free and responsible search isn’t a collective endeavor but a personal one. We can encourage each other to spiritual growth but first must accept each other individually. Each individual has inherent worth and dignity, but no institutional structure is called out for reverence. We promise each other mutual trust and support as we deepen our understanding and expand our vision. The words and deeds of prophetic people are optional sources depending on our personal preferences. The power of the sources we draw on are limited by our commitment to the right of conscience of the individual.

Sadly, there is little in Article II to counterbalance the strong commitment to individualism summarized in the Freedom of Belief statement:

Nothing herein shall be deemed to infringe upon the individual freedom of belief which is inherent in the Universalist and Unitarian heritages.

The component that could be the glue to hold Unitarian Universalism together is a theological reference that binds us together. In Abrahamic religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the unity is an affirmation and commitment to God in whatever way that tradition defines God. As an Association of Congregations seeking to bridge believers and unbelievers in one religious tradition, we cannot go there.

The word that most Unitarian Universalists believe binds us together is the word love.

The imprecise definition of love in English creates a big problem for us using it as a theological foundation. The Greeks have three expansive terms for love: eros, philia, and agape, erotic love, familial love, and transcendent love. Buddhists talk about four expressions of love: metta, karuna, mudita, and upekkha, good will to all, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimous love. For UU's, a combination of agape and metta seem to me to communicate what Unitarian Universalists mean when we talk about love. It shows up in all the other places too, but it has an elevated quality beyond the personal or the tribal kind of love one might have for another person or one's family, or team, or community. I think it might even be something more grand like a drive toward the social that arises again and again at the most elemental level of existence.

Standing on the Side of Love, now Siding with Love, has been a powerful way for us to talk about what drives our social justice movements. Maybe it belongs in our Principles.

The last complaint you'll see addressed in the current revisions is the lack of commitments and accountability. We say we have these values that we cherish. What are we willing to promise that we'll do with them? Are we willing to be held accountable for following through on that promise?

The 8th principle was created to address that glaring failure. The lofty statements we've made about the need for anti-racism, anti-oppression, multi-cultural work, especially in 1997 with our resolution titled Journey Toward Wholeness, has had weak follow through to strive for congregational and institutional transformation. This is the area our predominantly white congregations don't put on the front burner, unless a black person gets killed by a police officer. And then for about six months.

That gives you the overview of the importance of Article II in Unitarian Universalism and the discontents about it. But many people are just fine with Article II just as it is. We found that out in 2009 ... but it was a close vote. If the Article II Study Commission has done a good job for the last couple of years, they will bring something to us that will give us new language to express our identity in a way that can better unlock our potential.

Come back January 22 and you'll get to hear and discuss this new proposal.

Prayer of Affirmation

Let us turn inward now to seek the center

Do not be distracted by

the encrusted dishes in the sink,
the tarnished silverware in the drawer,
the musty clothes on the floor,
the piles of unread books on the nightstand,

Finding the center doesn't depend on when

the dishes are done, the silver is polished,
the clothes are clean, or the books are all read.

The center isn't a task to complete or mission to accomplish.

It is a place of balance

through which energy flows and is released.

It is a state of clarity

that permits the mind to make sense of the world.

It is a capacity to connect

that brings together parts into a whole.

May we seek our own center

of what we know is good, true, and beautiful about ourselves
following signs and signals from our hearts.

From that center,

may our love flow to the world.

So be it.