

Article II Part 2: Shared Values & Commitments

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore January 22, 2023

Call to Celebration

Welcome to the First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, affectionately known as Albany UU. My name is Rev. Sam Trumbore and I serve as lead minister of our congregation.

I also serve as an elected member of the Unitarian Universalist Association Board of Trustees. We have a long January meeting, on Zoom which concluded yesterday. Friday afternoon we received the final report of the Article II Study Commission with over 200 observers watching. You can read that report on the UUA website, uua.org/a2sc-report. It was an inspiring presentation that caps over two years of diligent work.

On January 8th, I discussed the background and motivation to change the portion of our bylaws where the seven principles and our six sources are codified. The Commission members spoke with appreciation and even reverence for them. And added that there is an urgent need for more contemporary language that can better serve and direct Unitarian Universalism's present and future.

The Commission's work has been a grass roots process from the beginning. In the interviews, focus groups, workshops, surveys and the aggregated responses, what you will hear and read were consistent themes. This is not a document of personal agenda or preference but rather an organic document coming from Unitarian Universalists telling the Commission what they believe is the center of Unitarian Universalism today.

So as you review this work and decide whether you will support it or not, rather than asking do I like these words, please ask the question, are these the words that reflect our congregation's values and commitments and the wider movement of Unitarian Universalism? Is this who we are becoming today, not who we were in the past.

In that spirit of open-hearted exploration
of our potential to transform the world through liberating Love
let us join together in the spirit of life.

Reading

[Proposed Changes to UUA Bylaws, Article II](#)

Section C-2.1. Purposes.

The Unitarian Universalist Association will devote its resources to and use its organizational powers for religious, educational, and humanitarian purposes. Its primary purposes are to assist congregations in their vital ministries, support and train leaders both lay and professional, to foster lifelong faith formation, to heal historic injustices, and to advance our Unitarian Universalist values in the world.

The purpose of the Unitarian Universalist Association is to actively engage its members in the transformation of the world through liberating Love.

Section C-2.2. Values and Covenant.

As Unitarian Universalists, we covenant, congregation-to-congregation and through our association, to support and assist one another in our ministries. We draw from our heritages of freedom, reason, hope, and courage, building on the foundation of love.

Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values. We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of Love.

Inseparable from one another, these shared values are:

Interdependence. We honor the interdependent web of all existence.

We covenant to cherish Earth and all beings by creating and nurturing relationships of care and respect. With humility and reverence, we acknowledge our place in the great web of life, and we work to repair harm and damaged relationships.

Pluralism. We celebrate that we are all sacred beings diverse in culture, experience, and theology.

We covenant to learn from one another in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We embrace our differences and commonalities with Love, curiosity, and respect.

Justice. We work to be diverse multicultural Beloved Communities where all thrive.

We covenant to dismantle racism and all forms of systemic oppression. We support the use of inclusive democratic processes to make decisions.

Transformation. We adapt to the changing world.

We covenant to collectively transform and grow spiritually and ethically. Openness to change is fundamental to our Unitarian and Universalist heritages, never complete and never perfect.

Generosity. We cultivate a spirit of gratitude and hope.

We covenant to freely and compassionately share our faith, presence, and resources. Our generosity connects us to one another in relationships of interdependence and mutuality.

Equity. We declare that every person has the right to flourish with inherent dignity and worthiness.

We covenant to use our time, wisdom, attention, and money to build and sustain fully accessible and inclusive communities.

Section C-2.3. Inspirations.

As Unitarian Universalists, we use, and are inspired by, sacred and secular understandings that help us to live into our values. We respect the histories, contexts and cultures in which they were created and are currently practiced.

These sources ground us and sustain us in ordinary, difficult, and joyous times. Grateful for the religious ancestries we inherit and the diversity which enriches our faith, we are called to ever deepen and expand our wisdom.

Section C-2.4. Inclusion.

Systems of power, privilege, and oppression have traditionally created barriers for persons and groups with particular identities, ages, abilities, and histories. We pledge to replace such barriers with ever-widening circles of solidarity and mutual respect. We strive to be an association of congregations that truly welcome all persons who share our values. We commit to being an association of congregations that empowers and enhances everyone's participation, especially those with historically marginalized identities.

Section C-2.5. Freedom of belief.

Congregational freedom and the individual's right of conscience are central to our Unitarian Universalist heritage. Congregations may establish statements of purpose, covenants, and bonds of union so long as they do not require that members adhere to a particular creed.

Sermon

We gather here on Sunday morning, drawn by a common set of values and beliefs that are challenging to capture in words.

While each one of us may have our own revered source or sources of those values and beliefs, we appreciate participation in a diverse community over one that demands uniformity. We feel called to advocate for more fairness, justice, equity and equality. We feel the urgency of climate change, species extinction, and environmental destruction. We recognize both our personal and collective responsibility. We advocate for immediate action, both personal and collective. We recognize the limitations of our social, cultural, ethical, moral, and rational understanding, spiritual experience and inner wisdom. We respond seeking knowledge and personal experience, growth and development for ourselves and our children and youth.

And we need contemporary language to put these intuitively sensed values into words.

This is what the Unitarian Universalist Association recognized back in 2017. The UUA Board created and defined a charge for the Article II Study Commission in 2020. The Commission began its work in the fall of that year. Part of the reason for the Commission was to consider the integration of the 8th Principle we passed last May.

Here are a few quotes from the UUA Board's charge to the Commission to give you a sense of the scope of work they were given:

- The Commission on Appraisal, in its report, *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*, cites Robert Miller's study of Unitarian Universalism, stating "UUs ranked loving as an instrumental value and mature love as a terminal value more highly than did respondents from other groups, religious and nonreligious." Dr. Cornel West says that "justice is what love looks like in public." Our commitment to personal, institutional and cultural change, rooted in anti-oppression, anti-racism, and multiculturalist values and practices, is love in action, and should be centered in any revision of Article II.
- The new Principles and Purposes should guide us in the transformation of ourselves, our communities and our faith into active networks of collective care, restoration, and justice.
- The Commission is charged with reviewing all sections of Article II, and is free to revise, replace, or restructure them as needed to meet the objectives stated above. There is nothing sacred about the number of principles or sources, nor their specific wordings, nor in the way that Article II is laid out. We encourage creativity. The Board would like to see an Article II that is inspirational, memorable and poetic. The language should be inclusive and welcoming, and explicitly anti-racist.

In the charge, the Board directed the Commission to seek out stakeholders within Unitarian Universalism such as:

- Congregational leaders both lay and professional
- Identity groups such as Black Lives of UU, UU LGBTQIA and disability organizations,
- Philosophical and theological groups (UU Buddhists, Humanists, Christians, etc.)
- UU issue groups (UU Ministry for earth, UUSC, etc.)
- Former UUs who have left, inactive UUs who retain UU identity
- And regular UUs like you and me

They did workshops at two General Assemblies, many focus groups, and surveys. They have received feedback from over 10,000 UUs.

Their first draft proposal went out in September followed up by many feedback sessions. The draft you are seeing today includes over 100 revisions from the first draft. (I counted them up with Word's comparison capability)

So let's dig in to this proposal you have as an insert in your order of service.

The big change is taking the principles and sources and converting them into seven one word values. Each value has a short one sentence elaboration of that value followed by a commitment, a promise in response to asserting that value. Instead of covenanting to "affirm and promote" a list of principles, each value has a special promise or promises to go with it. This sets up a guide for action, as an institution and as individuals, in relationship to that value. This is love in action with accountability built in. It defines us as a faith of transformational action not a religion of self-satisfied, self-righteousness.

As directed and affirmed by their charge, research, listening and study, the Commission did put love as they center of our faith from which the other six values spring. I just delight in the picture on

your order of service cover that expresses visually (and with a visual description) how they interact with each other.

Love is the core value, as I spoke about last week, with a very expansive definition of the word that reaches beyond the personal and the emotional. At the core of love is a transpersonal commitment that sees oneself as part of a social network that is greater than oneself. For those who are theists, this is the love of God. For atheists, it could be framed as the social value of the common good, maybe unconditional positive regard. However framed, together we can thrive, divided we fall apart. Care, compassion, sympathetic joy, loving-kindness, and recognition of inherent worth and dignity are all ways for defining Love expressed in this central value that affirms our social existence.

Five of the seven values are clear derivatives of the existing seven principles. Each borrows language from them, yet combines and refines the language, focusing them through the use of one word.

The “interdependence” value is the most obvious recasting of the seventh principle honoring the interdependent web of all existence. Interdependence has only become more important to us due to the environmental problems I described earlier. The verbs are different though. Not respect but *cherish* earth and all beings. Relate to the earth *with care and respect*. Rather than seeing the world as our dominion to do with what we want, we must first *find our place* in the great web of life with humility and reverence. And we need to commit to repair the world. This is a significant expansion of our seventh principle that I expect will find favor with most if not all of us.

“Pluralism” is a condensation of much of the language that honors difference in the current principles and sources. It also retains the language of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. It recognizes the wide diversity among us, not as we have in the past with tolerance, but with the verb *celebrate*. Our response to difference isn’t the silence and isolation that goes with tolerance, but rather a commitment to learn from one another. Rather than keeping our differences at arm’s length, we *embrace* both our differences **AND** our commonalities with love, curiosity and respect. We use our ability to put aside our biases and allow our curiosity to help us *appreciate and develop respect* for our differences. This requires a high degree of self-awareness to recognize inner bias and put it aside, at least temporarily, for the sake of developing loving relationship.

“Justice” is a value integral to Unitarian Universalism, present in the current principles and sources, and expanded with an anti-racist focus. Here is the strong influence of the 8th principle with the language of Beloved Community, dismantling racism and systemic oppression. While it may seem a little disjoint, this is also the home of a commitment to democracy, though with a twist. The language is “inclusive democratic processes.” This recognizes there are *many ways* to do democracy besides Roberts Rules of Order. It is open to developing decision making systems that are anti-oppressive of minorities and inclusive of marginalized voices.

“Equity” isn’t the same as justice, though they often get lumped together as in our current second principle does. Equity, in this case, focuses on the individual. Here is where the first principle language is preserved ... with some modification. The inherent worth and dignity of every person is transformed into every person has the right to flourish with inherent dignity and worthiness. It also has a specific charge to build and sustain fully accessible and inclusive communities. This is an intentional welcome to the disabled and LGBTQIA communities.

The “transformation” value is a confession of our endless imperfection. It is an acceptance of the reality of impermanence. No utopian vision is permanently achievable. We are forced to adapt to a changing world. That means none of us can sit back and assume we’ve worked out all the answers to the problems of the world ... or ourselves. We might know more or less than others but none of us knows it all. We must commit to a lifelong process to grow personally and collectively and to develop rationally, intellectually, morally, ethically and spiritually. There was no idealized past to return to. There is no perfected theology or philosophy to enact. We are forever growing and developing. We discover we are going the right way by reviewing and evaluating the results of our and others’ actions. Are we moving toward greater interdependence, greater justice, greater equity, more pluralism, more love.

The last value is a new one *that I hope is familiar* but it hasn’t been stated clearly: “Generosity,” defined as cultivating a spirit of gratitude and hope. The key verbs are *to share and connect* with one another freely and compassionately. Our members and friends highly value the spirit of community we nurture here. To support a community requires our time, talent, and treasure.

Generosity is especially meaningful to me because of its connection to the Buddhist concept of dana, the Pali word for giving. Dana is an antidote to the poison of greed and craving. Generosity helps one release the grip of craving and wanting. Generosity replaces the satisfaction of getting what I want with the *pleasure and enjoyment* of giving which can be *more satisfying* than the fulfillment of desires. Just like that magic penny!

The more challenging change may not be the changes to the principles but the elimination of the six sources. Rather than list them, and thus exclude ones like Buddhist teachings that are an integral source to my ministry, Section C-2.3 titled “inspirations” identifies *the general purposes* of our sources.

We are inspired by both secular and sacred sources but for this purpose: to help us live into our values. We are careful how we use those sources not staking an ownership claim. The sources are both inspirational and practical. They ground us and sustain us in good times, bad times and ordinary times. With a spirit of gratitude for the wealth of sources that are part of our historical tradition, such as the Bible, we claim an open canon of sacred and secular texts that we choose. Their purpose for us is to deepen and expand our wisdom.

Finally, there are changes to the other three sections ... but I’ll leave them for another day. They are not significantly substantial and more along the lines of editing and improving them.

So what’s next? The UUA Board has approved putting them on the agenda for General Assembly in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania this coming June. There will be workshops on them, feedback sessions, potential edits put forward by the UUA Board and individuals in mini-assemblies before and during General Assembly. If Article II does get a majority vote this year, we’ll have a year to think about and debate the changes. At General Assembly in 2024, this revised version will be up for a final vote. At that time, it will need a two-thirds majority to replace the current Article II.

This is a huge step for defining the future of Unitarian Universalism. It will become the guiding principles for the Unitarian Universalist Association. All our congregations will need to be in alignment with them to remain members of the Association. I fully expect a few congregations will

leave. But the greater clarity of our values and commitments will greatly strengthen us and our ability to be a transformational religious tradition inside and outside our congregations.

Tuesday was racial healing day. I attended an online event with Heather McGhee that night. She is author of the book *The Sum of Us*. (I did two sermons – [Zero Sum Dilemma](#) and [Sum of Us](#) – on this book last January) She spoke about “zero-sum” thinking, rooted in racism, that undermines the public good of our society. Conversely, “sum of us” thinking, when we work together and share together, can result in a solidarity dividend. The Article II changes are all about how to do sum of us thinking and get that solidarity dividend in our congregations too.

The Article II Study Commission readily admits the new language of Article II isn't perfect. There most likely will be amendments that will improve it. But I support the changes and look forward to the benefits we'll reap from this better language to express the beautiful value energy we strive to live into as Unitarian Universalists.