

Our Seventh Principle

A sermon by Rev. Roberta Finkelstein ©

“We affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” Our Seventh Principle

As long as there has been a Unitarian movement in this country, there has been an affirmation the centrality of individual thought and inherent worth, the right of conscience, and the relationship between free faith and the practice of democracy. As long as there has been a Universalist movement in this country, there has been affirmation of the relationship between love and justice, and the call to respond to God’s love by doing the work of justice in the larger community. When the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America merged in 1962, creating the Unitarian Universalist Association – and our faith as we know it today – many people wondered whether it would be possible to truly merge those disparate theologies. At the time of merger, the focus was on logistics and practicalities. We sort of said, “Theology? Eh, we’ll worry about that later.”

It took a while to get around to those theological questions. It took a while to find the words to describe a faith firmly grounded in both human experience and transcendent love and unity. Twenty years after the merger seemed like a good time to update our shared Unitarian Universalist covenant, known as the Principles and Purposes. There were some ideas that were givens; they had long been part of the language of our faith. But there was also an awareness that Unitarian Universalism had evolved into something different from either of the earlier Unitarian and Universalist movements. We had come to realize that an excessive emphasis on the individual at the expense of concepts of connection and community could lead to loneliness and even arrogance.

Rev. Ken Collier, the author of the Spider Woman tale I just read, relates the story of what happened at the 1984 General Assembly, as the final draft of a new statement of Principles and Purposes was being debated. “Unitarian Universalists went through a study process for four years that culminated at the 1984 General Assembly with the proposal for a new statement of Principles. The . . . proposal contained versions of each of the first six principles, but it did not directly mention interdependence. The concept was, perhaps, implicit in a number of other principles, especially the first concerning the inherent worth and dignity of every person, but even that one did not extend to non-humans. Many of us thought that there was something important missing, and some of us were prepared to vote against the proposal unless it was changed. As the debate wore on and patience grew thin, the Rev. Paul L'Herrou stood up and proposed this seventh Principle. Some word crafting ensued, but because almost everyone agreed with it in substance, it passed with few, if any, dissenting votes. A funny thing has happened since then. We appeal to these Principles for all sorts of things from supporting social action projects to theological projects and beyond. Of all seven, it is this last Principle that is appealed to by far the most often.”

It seems to me the Seventh Principle emerged out of a dialog between the dominant historical Unitarian theology and the evolving minority voiced Universalist theology. The historical Unitarian theology is best captured in historian Earl Morse Wilbur's description of (inside theology joke) the trinity of freedom, reason and tolerance. The evolving Universalist theology is best captured in the title of Bishop Michael Curry's recent sermon at the royal wedding: The Power of Love. Universalism sings in the Seventh Principle. Ironically, so does science and reason.

Rev. Barbara Merritt, in her essay on the seventh principle, invokes Bell's Theorem in quantum physics. “Take two paired photons, one charged positive,

one negative. Alter the polarization of one from negative to positive, and instantaneously the other photon changes its charge. Separate the two photons with 8,000 miles and six feet of lead, and, again, the moment that one charge is changed its bonded pair responds in kind. The connection between the paired particles is so profound that the change occurs no matter what the distance, or the obstacles, that seemingly separate them. Put them far enough apart, and the change occurs faster than the speed of light. As physicist Brian Hines writes, ‘ . . . nothing material links the two photons. The connection cannot be shielded by any type of matter or energy, and the strength of their linkage does not diminish with distance.’ This extraordinary connection between two particles in the subatomic level offers a glimpse at just how interconnected our existence really is.”

The power of love combined with the power of science and reason. And one thing about this Seventh Principle: it reflects the growing power of women’s spirituality in our movement. Though I hesitate to make gender-based generalizations, the radical individualism of historical Unitarianism strikes me as the characteristic of a male dominated movement. Affirming interconnection strikes me as the characteristic of ‘the feminization’ of our faith. (If you were here last week you got that joke.) The UU Women’s Federation was a force to be reckoned with back in the 1980’s. Women were streaming into seminaries. Relational theologies were finally getting their due. It all came together in that Seventh Principle. The power of love. The power of environmental science and nuclear physics. The power of connection.

So, what is this seventh Principle? It is certainly a poetic metaphor – powerful and lyrical beyond any other language used to express our faith. It has inspired artists and craftspeople, liturgical dancers and scientists. But ultimately the seventh principle is more than poetry or metaphor or physics or ecology. Like all our principles in this ‘deeds not creeds’ faith of ours, it is an ethical imperative.

It demands that we ask ourselves, “Given what we know about connectedness, how are we to be in the world?”

Take water, for example. Is it enough to stand in awe before the beauty of a waterfall? Is it enough to speak and sing our reverence for rain? Futurists tell us that there will come a time, sooner than we think, when wars will be fought across the globe not over access to oil, but over access to water. To conserve water is an act of reverence and of justice. To advocate to an end to pollution of our rivers and streams and oceans is an act of reverence and of justice. To speak up for the millions and millions of people on this globe who cannot simply turn on the faucet and access all the water they want is an act of reverence and of justice.

Our Seventh Principle puts us squarely on the front lines in the battle between corporate greed and the exploitation of natural resources for profit, on one side, and sustainable, reverent approaches to resource management on the other. It demands that we understand the intersection of justice and sustainability. It demands that we make ourselves aware of the reality that poor communities bear the overwhelming burden of polluted water, air and soil. You don’t find Super Fund sites in upper middle-class neighborhoods. Our ongoing relationship with the Southbridge community is the fruit of that recognition.

Right now, our Seventh Principle puts us in urgent opposition to an administration that seems determined to roll back even the most sensible of environmental protections. The lives of many forms of wildlife are in critical danger. Oceans, deserts, mountains are in critical danger. The air we breathe is in danger. The water we drink is in danger. As I have said on previous occasions, I am particularly heartbroken at the thought that my grandchildren will only be able to read about polar bears in books; there will soon be no more.

There are people in this congregation who make it their life work to live out the Seventh Principle. Chad Tolman, who requested this sermon, would love to

talk with you about Delaware Interfaith Power and Light. Our Environmental Justice Task Force is always looking for new volunteers. Not ready to become an activist? How about something simple like eating a little lower down on the food chain? Being just a little more intentional about your use of energy?

We celebrate the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. And, as people of faith, we also do all that we can to protect and preserve the integrity of that web. Spider Woman is still weaving. In gratitude, we continue to give homage to this earth, our home, and the precious gift of interconnected life.