

Unitarian Universalist Church of Wakefield

“Liberty Clause”

May 16, 2010

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We continue our look at the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism with Principle Five: right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.

So here, this morning, we arrive at our consideration of our Principle Five of Unitarian Universalism. You may remember, it reads “we covenant to affirm and promote the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.” At first glance we might wonder, what has this statement, one of our Seven Principles, have to do with a spiritual community? A faith community? A church, a society, a fellowship, or the Beloved Community—or whatever we might name ourselves through our own democratic process here at 326 Main Street, or wherever we have gathered in the past since our founding as the First Universalist Society or might gather in the future?

Our consideration of our Seven Principles this spring, both upstairs as a multigenerational community and downstairs with our children gathered for religious education, has been interspersed with other themes on Sundays since January, starting with the Inherent Worth and Dignity of every person of our First Principle through numbers two, three, four and number seven, which we took out of order to honor Earth Day in April, with the multigenerational service led by Meg Anzalone, our RE Consultant this spring, along with our children and the RE Committee. I have said in past weeks, and I will reiterate again as we consider this number five, that all of these principles are inextricably interrelated, just as in the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Some of you might have read in *The Gleam* or the press releases to the local papers that I was going to talk about “the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process” this morning and thought BORING! Good for you if you thought that and are still here in the pews this morning. Maybe you thought back to some civics class when you were growing up and dozing off while some teacher droned on about the Bill of Rights and the Constitution. And here you are among us, a glutton for punishment, if that’s what you thought I was going to talk about. Or maybe you were lucky and had a teacher who brought these foundational documents alive for you and you live your life, involved in the democratic process, never dreaming to miss a local election or Town Meeting. I hope to get across this morning that our participation in democracy,

here at our church and beyond in the larger community is far from boring but rather is part of our lifeblood—or should be if we are a vital community. And it is part of our spiritual practice, if you will, as a faith community, even as those foundational documents were created at the same time and even by some of the same people who were our forebears as Unitarians and Universalists. It is part of our covenant, what we affirm and promote.

That inherent worth and dignity of every individual is where we start, the very same place that can get us stuck in individualism, if we are not careful. And even though we UUs are often described as individualists—and many of us are very proud of that fact—we also claim that we aspire to the Beloved Community. Our fifth principle captures the spirit very clearly. We hold to the right of conscience while affirming the democratic process as essential to the function of the local church community as well as in the wider community. We reserve the right to think and believe as the individual chooses, each one of us. At the same time, UUs come together to learn, to study, to worship and to give back to the community in which they live, and do so without any threat to their individuality. At least that is our intention and our aspiration.

I wonder what your first experience of democracy was, if you go back in your memory. I guess my first memory was when Eisenhower was running for President when I was a little girl and my father gave me an “I like Ike” button to wear. In fact, I am wearing it in my school picture that year in grade school or maybe it was kindergarten. I suspect that I had no idea who this Ike was but thought the button was cool. I thought I still had it somewhere and this week routed around in a jar in which I have old buttons. I found my Spiro Agnew watch—which never worked by the way—a button that says LBJ for the USA, and another one with the rainbow colors and the words “We Can Make a World of Difference” from some forgotten campaign. I remembered that I had another button here in my office that I got at last year’s General Assembly, our national meeting when we do the business of the UUA when the Standing on the Side of Love campaign was kicked off—that campaign I mentioned in my sermon two weeks ago.

About the same era of the “I Like Ike” button, I was a huge fan of the Howdy Doody Show. Believe it or not, I still have a 45 RPM record that my parents—probably my Dad—got me back then. It was called “Howdy Doody’s Crystal Ball, featuring “Howdy Doody for President.” Since my siblings and I have been dismantling our family home this last couple of years since my father’s death and my mother’s progressing Alzheimer’s Disease, I was actually

able to find and listen to it this week. “Strike up the band; it’s Howdy Doody time!” The record was a mix of songs and dialogue about what all the characters on the show want to be when they grow up—a country doctor, a policeman...and Howdy Doody for President! Howdy Doody says he’ll make a lot of speeches and lead a lot of parades. “Vote for Howdy Doody and you’ll vote for the best man there is!” So all of that is somewhere in my subconscious when I think about the democratic process and the right of conscience. I have clearer memories of John F. Kennedy being elected. But I was pretty sure that the democratic process didn’t apply to the church I grew up in. Major decisions seemed to be made by the diocese, although I probably had a pretty foggy understanding of the process. It was in school that I learned more about the democratic process and what my one vote could mean.

I remember by the time I was nearing the end of high school, I had ideas about how the school might do things better and I ran for student council—and won. And my best friend from back then ran for the President of his class—“get going with Rowan” was his slogan. But democracy is not really just all about election campaigns, although that is an important part of it all. It is about how to have our voice heard. It is about speaking to our values. It is about an active process. We UUs think it is so important that we include it as one of our Seven Principles.

Our Fifth Principle links two themes: the right of conscience with the democratic process. They are yoked together. In preparation for thinking about this with you this morning, I read an essay by my colleague Earl Holt which considers how these two concepts are linked and their history.¹ Holt says that the right of conscience is rooted implicitly in both Unitarianism and Universalism prior to the merger of the two denominations in 1961. Freedom of conscience with Universalism arose as early as 1790 in Philadelphia with its “Universal Declaration of Faith.” This document was creedal in form and contained all the beliefs of Universalism of the time but also included what was called the *Liberty Clause*. This clause, which I have used to name the sermon this morning, advocated the individual right of conscience and some relaxing of the more strict interpretations of the Universalist faith emerging at the time. Earl Holt writes: “The Liberty Clause anticipated and made allowance for a variety of individual interpretations, stating that ‘neither this nor any other statement shall be imposed as a creedal test, provided that the faith thus indicted be professed.’” So was it creedal...or non-creedal? There was a creed but it

¹ Holt, Earl (1999). *The Right of Conscience and the Use of the Democratic Process in our congregation and in society at large* in *With Purpose and Principle. Essays about the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism*. Edited by Edward A. Frost. Boston: Skinner House, 69-77.

shouldn't be imposed as a test. Pretty ambiguous, I say. That Liberty Clause leaves a lot of room for us to this day to decide for ourselves, with our right of conscience, what we believe and how to use the democratic process.

As you know, this church was organized as a Universalist congregation and would have been part of the Universalist Convention. Our Unitarian forbears were not organized into a formal body in the same way. They didn't consider themselves to be a denomination, as such. From their start, Unitarians considered themselves to be an *association* of congregations, just as the UUA is today: the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. Each congregation was independent from each other and was governed by what is called congregational polity. That meant that each congregation was an individual entity, governing themselves, deciding for themselves what they believed, who they would call as minister, with freedom of the pulpit. The Unitarian historian, Earl Morse Wilbur, talks about the freedom of belief as one of the three pillars of Unitarianism, with the other two being reason and tolerance. So Unitarian congregations covenanted together—not to decide religious or spiritual beliefs, but, rather, to deal with the issues that arose from these churches associating with each other. The very bylaws of the early American Unitarian Association, that body that was created in the early 1800s, read: “The American Unitarian Association recognizes that its constituency is congregational in polity, and that individual freedom of belief is inherent in the Unitarian tradition. Nothing in these purposes shall be construed as an authoritative test.”²

By the time we get to the merger of the Unitarians and the Universalists in 1961, we find the language that upholds the right of conscience found in our fifth principle of today: The statement of merger defined Unitarian Universalism as an association of “autonomous, self-governing local churches and fellowships.”³ This very church expressed its belief in democratic process when it voted to join the new association at the time of merger. One of you has told me that that vote was not a done deal—that the vote to merge may have carried by only one vote! That is the democratic process in action...but also to me means that the identification of this place to Universalism was strong and is still permeating the walls of this congregation nearly forty years later. I believe we ignore that at our peril, as anyone or any group does who ignores their history.

² Ibid., 70.

³ Ibid.

So we decide together how we go about doing things around here—just as we had Annual Meeting last month and voted on a budget and your Board of Management was elected which meets monthly to make the day to day decisions on your behalf. But you are the church—each of you who have signed the membership book. You have the freedom to care for yourselves and your property.

The other half of the Fifth Principle is the use of democratic process. The use of the democratic process was implicitly contained within both early Universalism and Unitarianism.⁴ It was after the merger in 1961 that it became explicit. As you know, both Unitarianism and Universalism were born in our country in the formative years of this new country after the American Revolution. Most of the founders were from our very area here in New England, although there are even longer roots going back to Europe and Romania. Some of the founders of our nation were also members of Unitarian and Universalists churches—like the Universalist Benjamin Rush and the Unitarian Joseph Priestley, someone who greatly influenced John Adams and Thomas Jefferson.⁵ This earlier time was a ferment of ideas and the ideas from the secular world and the sacred world intermingled to a great degree.

Earl Holt writes: “The political notion that people have a right to self-government grows out of a religious conviction that human beings have the capacity to shape their own destiny, that they are not mere puppets on a divine string. Democracy, to put it another way, is more than a mechanism of governance. It is an expression of faith in the power of human beings to shape their own lives, a faith that is most explicit in the ideals of our religious tradition.”⁶

Of course, we know that democracy is not a perfect form of government, whether in the society at large or here in our congregation when we are trying to make decisions about paint colors and whether or not to sell the old wooden chairs stored downstairs. We know there are flaws, as Winston Churchill famously once pointed out: “democracy is the worst form of government—except for all the others.”

Both Wakefield and Wayland where I live are run by Town Meeting. Not everything goes smoothly, even with the best intentions of folks (and perhaps not all of the folks involved even have good intentions). Wayland is in the middle of their Town Meeting right now and folks come in to vote on the one issue they care about and then leave in droves, leaving just a remnant

⁴ Ibid., 69.

⁵ Ibid., 71.

⁶ Ibid., 72.

to vote on important business. That's a flaw. And we know that not all annual meetings of this church have run smoothly, even with the guidance of a moderator of the likes of Eric. One of the flaws of the democratic process is the majority rule. That means that some portion of the community—big or small—does not achieve what they wish. And we know from the history of our nation that the majority rule can be terribly wrong, as in the history of slavery. Kenneth Collier writes in another essay on the Fifth Principle that “furthermore, it should never be forgotten that not only can the majority of people be terribly wrong, but the majority is not the people. It is only the largest fraction of the people. (And occasionally in this ‘democracy’ of ours, it is not even that. When a significant enough portion of the electorate do not vote, even a very small fraction of the people can determine the outcome of an election.”)⁷ That's why we at least want to have a quorum at Annual Meeting. But wouldn't it be better if we were all present for this process which is central to our ongoing life as a congregation? But even then, part of what we would be doing is agreeing to disagree. There is always someone in the minority, unless it is a unanimous vote. And we might be very right and be in the minority. As my colleague serving our church in Northboro, Judith Wright says: “We need each other's perspectives. We need each other's differences. We can only grow and change in healthier ways through each of us expressing our own freedom of conscience and being respectful and open to those who differ from us. In other words, we need the right of conscience to balance the use of our democratic process.”⁸

So now that we are reforming a social action committee here at our congregation, we will be bringing together our individual rights of conscience together to try to make a corporate decision on what to focus on. There was a meeting last Monday night to make a start at that. I will be interested to see what your democratic process comes up with! One of the issues topmost in many minds this week in our larger Association is the immigration law adopted in Arizona, many UUs opposition to it, especially in light of the Standing on the Side of Love campaign which specifically addresses immigration issues as part of what it talks about. It certainly presents a conundrum for the UUA who had been planning to hold General Assembly there in 2012. I end with some words written in the last few days by the Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray, who is our minister serving in Phoenix. She writes:

⁷ Collier, Kenneth (1997). *Our Seven Principles in Story and Verse*. Boston: Skinner House, 72.

⁸ Wright, Judith. Sermon on January 10, 2010. First Parish Church UU, Northboro MA.

“We in Arizona need you.

In Phoenix, I am ministering to a wounded community that needs more love than I alone can give.

When I felt my call to the ministry in 1995, I knew it would be a challenging path. But I never anticipated that I would end up fighting against a police state. A statewide coalition of immigrant groups, faith communities, and local organizations have issued a call for people across the nation to come to Phoenix on May 29th. The Standing on the Side of Love campaign will be there along with many national faith leaders, including the President of my Unitarian Universalist faith, Rev. Peter Morales. There is still time to stop SB 1040 from going into effect. We want a half million people in Phoenix on May 29th. Even if it is not easy, we need each person who is able, to follow the challenging path to Arizona.”⁹ She signs her letter, “yours in the struggle.” Reverend Frederick-Grey is exercising her right of conscience. Perhaps you are called to join many of our ministers and lay people in Phoenix. I know folks who are going. Perhaps you have beliefs that call you to do something closer to home. What does the Fifth Principle call you to do?

⁹ Standing on the Side of Love, 5-14-10.