

Civilization is such a big word. It is both a process and a goal. And it seems to take forever. The last line from the hymn we sang on September 15, “Where My Free Spirit Onward Leads” seems to sum up our dilemma: “eternity is hard to ken/and harder still is this:/ a human life when truly seen is briefer than a kiss.”

Every new human is born into a world of chaos—blinding light, crashing noise, feeling startling cold on new skin, fighting to breathe in a completely new way—and hungry, so hungry—hungry for sustenance, hungry for touch, hungry to be wrapped in protective arms. Although each of us has experienced this directly, not one of us remembers it firsthand, these first moments, first days and even first couple of years of introduction into humanity. It is not until we have gained the perspective of maturity and have witnessed other little humans being born that we can fully appreciate the wonder, the beauty, the terror of becoming human.

The birth of humankind must have been similar: chaos. Small bands of early humans struggling against continual hunger, against threats hidden in the night’s darkness, must have felt a baby’s deep needs of togetherness for safety, for companionship and for the sharing of knowledge. Unlike today’s little human who comes into the world already surrounded by knowledgeable adults, who are skilled in medicine, adroit at communicating with one another for the protection and later the education of this new life, our earliest ancestors had to do this all by themselves.

Allan Bloom, professor of classics at Columbia in the 1980’s observed: “Education, or more properly, civilization, is the taming of the soul’s passions—not suppressing or excising them, which would deprive the soul of its energy—but forming and informing them as art.”

The tetrahedron (the simplest pyramidal structure with four triangles making up each of its sides and base) was introduced to the U.S. as an architectural component by Unitarian and architect Bucky Fuller. The tetrahedron is the most stable shape out of which to build anything, including civilization.

This morning let’s look briefly at the four sides of a tetrahedron of qualities on which the progress of civilization seems to rest: Truth, Beauty, Love, and Purpose.

And we won’t worry about the enormity of the task—this civilization business—nor the brevity of our individual lives nor even the relative brevity of the history of humankind, for as Cat Stevens reminded us in his beautiful song: It is only daybreak. Morning has just broken. We are still in the dawn of civilization and are asked only to do our part as the work continues.

### Truth

Two of our UU Principles speak directly to the importance of truth:

The 4th Principle: A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

And the 5th Principle: The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.

Truth has only two enemies really but they are powerful: ignorance and deceit.

While progressive religion has never been dismayed at the continuing revelations of science, nearly all fundamentalist forms of religion have, at various periods in history, chosen the protective cloak of ignorance against the sunlight of scientific discovery and invention. In ancient Athens, Socrates was put to death for teaching his young students to take no statements or beliefs at face value until they had examined them. In 1633 Galileo was found guilty of heresy by the Catholic Inquisition for declaring that the earth revolved around the sun. Darwin’s publication of the *Origin of the Species*, claiming that man had evolved from earlier life forms, caused wide religious resistance. That resistance continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, leading, in the United States for example, to the 1923 trial in Tennessee of biology teacher John Scopes, in which Scopes was found guilty of teachings about evolution that were contrary to both the Bible and to state law.

And even today, almost a hundred years after the Scopes trial, this deep suspicion of the fruits of scientific progress continues still. Consider, for example, the scientific miracle of vaccination. This live-saving discovery—which has saved millions of Americans from the scourges of diseases like polio and TB—is still confronted by conspiracies as old as those that plagued (pun intended) the work of Edward Jenner and his disciples. Cries of “It’s the work of the devil” have been superseded by even more bizarre warnings, such as the one that arose against the Covid vaccine claiming that the government was planting microchips in the vaccine in order to control the entire population. Obviously, the battle for truth against ignorance goes on.

Deceit, however is different. Deceit is the willful suppression of the truth by an individual in order either to provide something of gain to themselves or to escape punishment and shame. Picture the three-year-old standing in the kitchen holding the cookie while insisting the dog stole it. Every one of the world’s great religions spoke out for the importance of truth and against the great harm of lying:

1. Confucius said we need word and deed to conform, in other words, actions should reflect words. [So don’t say, “I care about you and I will be a good public servant” if you really just want money and power.] If we all lie, trust will evaporate.
2. The *Old Testament* book of Leviticus: Ye shall not steal; neither shall ye deal falsely, nor lie one to another.
3. One of the essential steps on the Buddha’s Eight-Fold Path, Right Speech says: Refrain from Lying, Divisive or Abusive Speech, and Idle Chatter.
4. Jesus on the importance of truthfulness: “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”
5. Tao Te Ching: “Only simple and quiet words will ripen of themselves. For a whirlwind does not last a whole morning. Nor does a sudden shower last a whole day.”
6. Hinduism: Satya is the Sanskrit word for truth. The highest truth can mean God Himself, or it can mean an ethical virtue, being true and consistent with reality in one’s thought, speech and action.
7. In the Koran, Mohammed admonished: “I enjoin you to be truthful, for truthfulness leads to righteousness and righteousness leads to Paradise.”

The harm that deceitfulness can cause is clear in the case of a family where one member refuses to admit their substance addiction or a spouse tries to hide infidelity. And if a corporation lies about its financial condition, tens of thousands of shareholders and employees can suffer. Remember Enron?

Or when a leader tells lies like, “The Jews are the destroyers of our culture” (Hitler), or “Ukrainian farmers are enemies of the state and must be bought to submission” (Stalin)—this last led to the starvation of millions. Or even today in Russia: Putin claimed that the Ukrainians were held captive by a Nazi regime and must be invaded in order to liberate them. Finally, even in our own country today we are told that Haitian immigrants are eating the pets of their neighbors in Ohio and that the immigrant plague must be removed by police violence, if necessary. The costs of deceit at these levels are enormous and threaten the very fabric of civilization.

When a man lies, he weakens his character. When the leader of a state or of a nation tells lies they diminish not only themselves but can lead the nation to ruin.

### Beauty

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty. That is all ye know on earth—and all ye need to know.” When Keats, one of the English Romantic poets, wrote those words in 1819, he was reacting to what he saw as the emotional drought of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Despite the importance of scientific truth and individual truthfulness in the civilizing of humankind, Keats felt that intellectual knowledge by itself was not enough to “humanize” humanity—that being just “up in your head” would keep people from seeing the importance of the world around them—that they would miss what UU’s 1st Principle says is simply “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” So how does beauty help to civilize us, to see the worth and dignity in our world? What is its importance, its vital role, that hand and hand with scientific progress and moral integrity is necessary for our world to progress?

The caves in Lascaux, France were painted as long ago as 17,000 BC—well before the appearance of the earliest civilizations, well before even the beginnings of written language. These Paleolithic artists recorded, through the language of shape and color, what was of utmost importance to them: the animals that sustained them and the skills required to catch and kill them. This is the first record of the language of beauty: recording with rapt—and as Keats implied—eternal attention to what is important. These more than 600 cave paintings were produced by prehistoric artists over many generations. It is not impossible to suppose that some of these paintings were the work of later tribes passing through the area and duplicating what they had seen. This in its most basic form is how the civilizing of man begins: one generation leaves behind a record of itself from which following generations can learn. It turns out that the first human library was one of pictures on stone.

At its most basic and vital, beauty is produced by rapt attention. Whether a painting, a sculpture, a poem, a symphony, or an architect’s drawing for a cathedral, a thing of beauty occurs when one human being concentrates their attention, excludes the extraneous, and produces a work of art. The artist gets outside of themselves by, ironically, going inside of themselves and envisioning the beauty before them. Viewing a beautiful object or listening to a moving piece of music or reading a poem or a passage that stirs us deeply serves the same purpose. We learn to pay attention to something outside of ourselves so that we can change what is inside of ourselves. In bestowing the priceless gift of our attention to something outside of ourselves, we are showing that at this moment what I am looking at and, if lucky (or more properly “trained” rather than just lucky) really seeing, is more important, more valuable than anything else. As for the artist, seeing the beautiful teaches us to frame, to exclude the extraneous, the noise—whether visual, or auditory or tactile or cultural or historical or even

personal—and to see what’s in front of us, to see its importance, its vitality. When we can look at a tree or a flower or a face—whether of a loved one, a panhandler or even an enemy—and see its remarkable beauty, with everything else for the moment extraneous to the very fact of its existence framed out, then we will have surely become transformed by beauty and certainly more civilized.

### Love

“I love that dress. I love my new car. I love that song.”

We use the word love with great frequency and little awareness. By love we often mean its timid cousin “like” as in either “I’d like to own that” or “I like the good feeling I have when that is around.” But liking is certainly too weak a sentiment to form a strong enough base for the tetrahedron on which to support a marriage, or a family, or a nation, let alone a civilization.

The element that raises “like” and “feels good” to the level that means love is sacrifice. Love in the form of sacrifice is at the heart of the progress of civilization. Look at these three examples of great loves that moved civilization forward. In each of these examples love and courage became synonymous.

In 399 BC Socrates was brought before the Athenian court on two charges—each of which carried the death penalty. Each charge had to do with the teachings he had offered to Athenian youth and each was religious in nature. The first charge against him was that he had taught that the Greek gods were not like humans and did not have bodies or human emotions. The second charge, which the court considered even more dangerous to the stability of Greek society, was that every human being has a spirit—a conscience—which would lead him to right action—regardless of what the religious or cultural laws of the time demanded. When given the opportunity to publicly apologize and recant his teachings, Socrates refused and instead accepted death. He sacrificed his life in the defense of and love for truth.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of April in 1945 as the Third Reich was collapsing and just three weeks before Adolph Hitler committed suicide, Lutheran pastor and fervent anti-Nazi Dietrich Bonhoeffer was hanged. This was a final act of Nazi vengeance against the little pastor following one and half years of his imprisonment. Up to the very end, Bonhoeffer, like Socrates, was given repeated opportunities to recant his anti-Nazi writings and spare his own life, but he refused. As he had written in his book *The Cost of Discipleship* true grace is costly. His love for his religion—with its central tenet of “love your neighbor as yourself”—was greater than his fear of death. His dying became a living, lasting declaration in defense of the innocent.

And, finally, a sacrifice in the name of love and truth with which everyone is familiar, Jesus of Nazareth. I, like many UUs, do not believe in the divinity of Jesus. But for me this belief serves to make Good Friday the most important and powerful day of remembrance in the season of Easter. That this man of no great standing from the little village of Nazareth carried a simple message into the world that threatened both the traditions of his Hebrew heritage and the authority of his Roman masters: that there was an authority greater than both. Over the last three days of his life this simple man was given repeated opportunities to either escape in the night or when brought before the Roman

magistrate to recant his message of love. He refused and willingly accepted death by crucifixion, offering up his life as the ultimate sacrifice that a human being can make out of love.

St. Francis of Assisi summed up the importance of sacrificing for our loved ones as well as for strangers whom we will never meet:

“Remember that when you leave this earth, you can take with you nothing that you have received—only what you have given: a full heart, enriched by honest service, love, sacrifice, and courage.”

### Purpose

We must adhere to and honor truth like a scientist. We must acknowledge the astounding beauty of each element of the creation of which we are a part by giving it the undivided attention of an artist. We must love and protect and sacrifice for the future of humankind as if it were our child. But why? What after all is the reason for this? Why follow these precepts? Why follow our UU Principles? Why bother whether our triangle can enlarge into a tetrahedron and become a building block rather than just a collection of concepts?

The 6th Principle of the UU faith expresses the reason that we must strive to become increasingly civilized: The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;

Let’s listen to the words of some explorers looking for a more civilized future.

First America’s father of the geodesic dome. As a young man Buckminster Fuller had experienced failure as a student, as a lover, and as a family member. He had reached such a depth of despair and depression that he was not sure he could go on. At this moment of blackness, contemplating suicide, he was struck by a thought in the form of what he described as an “intuitive voice” that energized him for the remainder of his long and productive life:

“From now on you need never await temporal attestation to your thought. You think the truth. You do not have the right to eliminate yourself. You do not belong to you. You belong to the Universe. Your significance will remain forever obscured to you, but you may assume that you are fulfilling your role if you apply yourself to converting your experiences to the highest advantage of others.”

Said another way, Fuller sensed that this world was like a train pushed forward by an enormous power and that his job was simply to stay on the train, enjoy the ride and help all the other passengers—some laughing, some squabbling and some still asleep—to enjoy the trip along with him.

Next hear the words of Albert Einstein in a 1932 *Address to Student Disarmament Meeting in Germany*:

“The fate of the human race is more than ever dependent upon its moral strength. The way to a joyful and happy existence is everywhere through renunciation and self-limitation. Where can strength for such a process come from? Only from those who in their early years have had the chance to fortify their minds and broaden their outlook through study.”

Though his words would not by themselves dissuade the German people from pursuing the calamitous path outlined by the lies of Hitler, Einstein did not lose hope.

He was a man who thought deeply, widely and long into the future. I have little comprehension of his insights into physics. But about human society, human progress and the relationship between science and spirituality, I understood the following: while science and tradition-bound religion are in constant conflict, Einstein saw no such conflict between science and spirituality. The spiritual is the dark totality of universal existence, while science reveals that portion of the darkness available to human thought in the moment of the “evolving”

present. His instinctual emotional and intellectual drive, like all of the most spiritual people in all time, was toward a goal of unity—physically, mathematically, politically, artistically and spiritually. This directed, energized and clarified all of his thinking. It gave it purpose. Einstein sensed morally and described scientifically the truth of UU’s 7<sup>th</sup> Principle:

Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

#### Conclusion

Be civil to one another, for on this is civilization based. Jesus was asked (by the Pharisees trying to trip him up): What are the most important lessons that we should follow, in order to assure our own future, the future of those whom we love and the future of this earth which was given to our ancestors, to ourselves and to generations yet unborn?

Jesus said, in so many words, “You must love that which is so large, so powerful, so beautiful that it can never be named (TAO, YHWH, Brahman, Mazda) and you must love your neighbor as yourself. On this is all the wisdom of the ages based.”

Longshoreman and philosopher, Eric Hoffer said much the same:

“The remarkable thing is that we really do love others, our neighbors, as ourselves: we do unto others as we do unto ourselves. We hate others when we hate ourselves. We are tolerant unto others when we tolerate ourselves. We forgive others when we forgive ourselves.”

And remember:

You can own the land your home sits on, but you can’t own the air you breathe when you’re standing on that land. You can own the garden in back of your home but you can’t own the rain and sunlight that makes that garden grow. You can own a plot of land right down to the edge of the river, but you can’t own the river that flows past. The air, the rain, the sunlight and the river are shared with others. In the same way, this moment that you are experiencing as you sit here this morning is yours, but the future of which your moment becomes a part is not yours. It belongs to everyone.

May it continue to be so.