

Theme: "Guided by Faith"

Written and Presented by: Rev. "Twinkle" Marie Manning

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UU Congregation of Waterville, Maine
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The original audio of this sermon is online:

www.TwinklesPlace.org/uu-guided-by-faith/
https://youtu.be/jAmSb_nCz18

ABOUT REV. MANNING:

Rev. Marie Manning, affectionally known to us as "Twinkle" is in her third year as the Contract Minister for the UU Congregation of Waterville, Maine. She is available for Pulpit Supply as well as Retreat and Workshop facilitation.

For more information about Twinkle, visit: www.TwinklesPlace.org/about-twinkle/

ABOUT THIS SERVICE:

The Unitarian Universalist faith tradition is characterized by its commitment to theological diversity, inclusivity, and social justice. It is not rooted in dogma. Members need not adhere to a creed or doctrine. In the broadest terms, Unitarianism emphasizes human agency and Universalism centers on the inclusion of everyone. Unitarian Universalism draws from six religious and spiritual sources. It has long been guided by seven principles. This service explores this rich history, as well as introduces the UUA's shared values, even as it considers the core purpose of Unitarian Universalism, and, indeed, this congregation.

THOUGHT FOR CONTEMPLATION:

"The purpose of leadership is not to make the present bearable. The purpose of leadership is to make the future possible." - Joan D. Chittiser

6 SOURCES

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men 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.

This last one was added in 1995. Which was a result of an earlier mandate issued by UU Women and Religion at the 1977 General Assembly's in the UUWR Resolution that ushered forth deep reflection upon and examination of UU patriarchal norms. A call that included contemplation of every vestige of oppression: sexism, classism, racism, homophobia and more.

The adoption of this 6th source for the first time explicitly included members with Witchcraft, Neopagan, Native American, and other natural theist spiritualities.

A truly encompassing faith tradition where all who seek spiritual solace would know they are welcome!

7 PRINCIPLES

1st The inherent worth and dignity of every person (alt: every being);

2nd Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;

3rd Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;

4th A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;

5th The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;

6th The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;

7th Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Six of these principles were adopted in 1960 when the Universalist Church of America and the American Unitarian Association were consolidating.

The original wording was updated in 1984, changing out exclusively male-gendered language to be more inclusive.

And, in 1985 the 7th principle being added. Again, answering the earlier UUWR call for inclusivity.

UUA SHARED VALUES

Recently, the UUA has adopted Shared Values. They are

- Interdependence
- Pluralism
- Justice
- Transformation
- Generosity
- Equity

with

- Love at the Center

These are more fully defined as:

- **Interdependence:** We honor the interdependent web of all existence and acknowledge our place in it.
- **Pluralism:** We are all sacred beings, diverse in culture, experience, and theology.
- **Justice:** We work to be diverse multicultural Beloved Communities where all feel welcome and can thrive.
- **Transformation:** We adapt to the changing world.
- **Generosity:** We cultivate a spirit of gratitude and hope.
- **Equity:** We declare that every person is inherently worthy and has the right to flourish with dignity, love, and compassion.

SERMON:

“Guided by Faith”

by Rev. “Twinkle” Marie Manning

I will begin this message by stating that changes tend to bring controversy.

And, *controversy*, tends to bring changes.

Human history has demonstrated this time and again.

The same is true for UU History.

Over the years, Unitarian Universalism, and its earlier incarnations and roots, have had many controversies. Perhaps one of the earliest being over the question of the nature of Jesus: was he God or man or *both*? (Circa 325 AD/CE)

Disputes often resulting in heated debates and divisions.

For example:

Did you know that in 1826, during Rev. Ezra Ripley’s long ministry at First Parish in Concord, Massachusetts, there was a controversy stemming from some members wanting to evolve towards more progressive theologies and others wanting more traditional theologies.

Because of this schism, *rather than joining the newly formed* American Unitarian Association, the *traditional-leaning* members ultimately left and formed a new congregation - Concord’s Trinitarian Congregational Church.

When they left...they took with them the Congregation’s silver, including, the *coveted* Silver Communion setting. Which was an amazing collection of pitchers and cups that were created by Paul Revere’s grandfather.

I believe there is some sort of “custody arrangement” in our present day between the two churches and the Museum in Concord.

Certainly in the 19th century not all UUs agreed upon some really important topics:

- the abolition of slavery,
 - women's rights,
 - public education
 - the civil rights movement
- and
- *eugenics*.

And, while today UUs agree on many things,

there are still disagreements

about social justice issues,

Such as:

- the death penalty,
 - the merits of warfare,
 - how best to approach healing racism,
 - the extent for which trans rights infringe upon women's rights,
- and, *vice versa*,

And, there are still disagreements about the nature of God.

As well as ...whether or not Unitarian Universalism is a denomination or even a religion.

Though most agree to disagree.

What is most widely promoted is Unitarian Universalism as a Living Tradition.

Within that evolving structure, the Sources and Principles have helped to shape the identity of Unitarian Universalists, and Unitarian Universalism as a whole from its inception.

Virtually every UU congregation I am aware of has long turned to the 7 Principles and 6 Sources as ways of explaining what Unitarian Universalism is. As well as, a touchstone for affirming their *own* faith found within this small tradition.

For a short time there was an effort to adopt an 8th Principle, yet this was short lived. There was ambiguity around whether it was redundant and limiting.

Though, because the UUA-sponsored 8th Principle Project generated a lot of organizational publicity, some congregations began to incorporate an 8th Principle, but most did not, and ultimately the UUA never added the 8th Principle to their bylaws.

After the failed 8th Principle attempt, and, as part of a design for a complete restructuring, amid years of somewhat heated controversy, culminating during the 2024 UUA General Assembly, the UUA successfully removed the Seven Principles and Six Sources from the Unitarian Universalist Association's (UUA) bylaws.

Article II, where the Principles and Sources were listed, was rewritten completely to include instead what are now called Shared Values.

From what I understand, a large portion of UU Congregations - *and their members* - were unaware of these upcoming changes.

Even those who were informed often didn't understand the reasons for the opposition that was rising against the changes.

And, those who were opposed to the changes, *were utterly silenced* to every extent possible by those who wanted the changes. With some even banned from attending General Assemblies.

The changes were widely embraced by those who felt the Principles and Sources were outdated, potentially dogmatic, or held too closely to dogma, doctrine or creeds.

And some, including the UUA President, Sofia Bentancourt, argued that the *first principle* about the inherent worth and dignity of every person was, racist at its core.

Needless to say, there has been much argument about that.

Within the context of beliefs and teachings, if doctrine refers to a general body of religious teachings, and dogma represents specific, unyielding, and authoritative doctrines, I *personally* do not see the Sources and Principles as either dogma or doctrine.

Yet, if creed is a summary or statement of beliefs held by UUs, then *perhaps* some do use the Principles and Sources that way.

But not ever as a tool *to enforce* any specific beliefs.

I've always seen them more as a starting point. A way of demonstrating how inclusive and diverse Unitarian Universalism is.

In any event, all favoring the changes seemed to indicate they were part of a broader plan to update and clarify the organization's purpose.

The GA Planning Committee advocated the changes.

Even the GA's Moderators were advocates of the changes...
(which as designated neutral parties was also seen as problematic for those opposed to the changes).

The Article II Study Commission said it aimed to

- articulate shared values,
- establish a cultural touchstone,
- provide educational resources,
- serve as a personal code of ethics,

and

- help explain Unitarian Universalism to the broader public.

Note: If anyone has successfully created an "elevator pitch" that succinctly describes Unitarian Universalism, please let me know! ;)

Now, making modifications to Article II is not a new thing.
Over the years there were multiple amendments.
(A couple mentioned in opening words)

In fact, the bylaws are said to mandate that a *review* of the bylaws take place every 15 years. Not necessarily *change* them, but certainly in a Living Tradition, as with any viable nonprofit corporation, it is good - *even necessary* - to dedicate time to examine its own self-imposed guiding rules, to ensure they meet the moment. And, to modify as needed.

The ideal method for such organizational self-examination, especially one that affirms
the inherent dignity of every person,
and
the free and responsible search for truth and meaning,
and
the use of the democratic process, is to employ transparency and full participation.

Among the primary concerns of those opposed to the Article II changes, in addition to the deletion of the Principles and Sources, is *they say* that the new wording changed the role and purposes of the UUA from serving congregations to actively participating in, and possibly dictating, what congregational life is meant to be.

This along with wording that is a change away from affirming the *individual* search for truth and meaning to now be seen as a collective “we.”

That is to say that, members of the UUA, Member Congregations of the UUA all collectively agree what is truth
and
all collectively agree what has meaning,
according to what the UUA says is Truth and Meaning.

These changes in phrasings concern those who wish to maintain Congregational Polity.

Among those who object to the changes, is concern that the UUA may be intent on:

- presiding over the affairs of its member churches,
- control finances and property,
- dispense theology,
- and
- seek to regulate and *punish* ministers and congregations who do not satisfactorily abide.

As a result of various emerging controversies, including the censure and (the UUA equivalent to) excommunication from the UUA and its Ministers Association of reputable yet vocally opposed clergy, from 2019 to 2024, various dissenting groups were formed, including:

the Unitarian 4th Principle;
the 5th Principle Project;
Save the 7 Principles Group;
and

Some Canadian UUs referred to themselves as the Loyal Opposition. :)

And, of course, there were *Gadflies*, which would take a whole other sermon and a full day's workshop to unpack.

For reference:

Rev. Todd Eklof, Rev. Kate Braestrup, Rev. Thandeka and others have written extensively online about the various controversies.

To bolster their concern, some of those opposed cite that some congregations have already been advised to alter their congregation bylaws in ways that weaken their autonomy. Such as, by deferring to the UUA on matters like:

- ministry definitions,
- theological stances
- and
- internal conflict resolution.

Several UU Congregations hosted sermons, workshops, and, importantly, *conversations* for all sides to discuss their concerns. Those for and against the changes. As well as to do an in-depth review of the proposed changes to Article II. A few such congregations were the Unitarian Society of Hartford, CT, UU Church of Jacksonville, Florida, UU Church of Spokane, Washington, UU Congregation of Salem, Oregon, and others.

What stood out from this period of discussion was that many delegates who had access to a wide range of information about the proposed changes *voted against the changes*, while the majority of delegates, relying only on UUA-approved materials, supported the amendments. So the amendment passed.

That said, it's important to remember that congregations are *not required* to adopt the new UUA values *nor* abandon the Principles and Sources.

Each congregation retains the right to choose how to define its own identity and *what* to include in its bylaws.

Like with all recommendations from the UUA, *these changes are optional*.

You see, unlike the Catholic Church which functions with *Denominational Polity*. Where the Pope is the visible head of the Catholic Church. His jurisdiction is called the Holy See. While based in and having “exclusive dominion over” Vatican City, is the central governing authority of The Catholic Church worldwide. They dictate canon, policy, procedure and doctrine to their churches.

Unitarian Universalist churches, *however*, operate based on *Congregational Polity*.

Meaning, individual congregations govern themselves.

The UUA in Boston is not the “Holy See.”

You may be a member congregation of the UUA, just like you may be a member of the North American Unitarian Association (NAUA), or a member of the Universalist Convocation, or even a member of the local Chamber of Commerce, or any number of service organizations, but none of them have the authority to tell you how to operate. You and you alone get to decide what is best for your congregation and leave the rest.

Part of this *Congregational Polity* is that Congregations have the sole right to ordain clergy. As well as the tenet of Free Pulpit, Free Pew.

Meaning, Members and Ministers are free to hold their own sacred beliefs and not required to adhere to the beliefs of other local church members...

(I am quite positive that the people sitting beside you do not all believe with each other on what is sacred, holy, or even true!)...

Let alone any larger denomination's -or in this case organization's- doctrines or teachings.

UU Scholars defer *at length* to "The Cambridge Platform" - more formally, registered as *A Platform of Church Discipline Gathered Out of the Word of God and Agreed Upon by the Elders and Messengers of the Churches Assembled in the Synod at Cambridge in New England* in 1648. where *Congregational Polity* was formally defined in writing *though* had long been established as the mode of operation in New England churches.

Of the 65 congregations that voted to ratify the Platform in 1648 to clarify Congregational Polity, 21 congregations were the predecessors of. Unitarian and/or Universalist. Each seeking to clarify that they *-and they alone-* have the ability to advise and recommend; That no overarching organizations may impose jurisdiction or authority over a local church or groups of churches.

The sentiment of the *gathered congregations* was to support one another through fellowship, yet hold no authority over each other.

Of note in Chapter XV (15) of The Cambridge Platform under the heading "*Of the Communion (or Relations) of Churches One with Another*"

It lists suggestions as to how they could maintain fellowship, including,

- Actively caring for each others congregations by:
- Consulting on matters one church may have more experience in than another,
- Convening together multiple congregations regularly

And, notably,

- supporting each other *financially*.

Given the diversity of UU congregations across the country, the potential for disagreements within the larger UU community is natural.

However, I believe there is still a shared commitment to supporting each other, especially in times of struggle.

I am not certain how often that happens, yet as of the 2024 UUA Certification Report, the UUA cites that as a whole, UU Congregational endowments and reserves are currently totaling \$ 1.1 billion and growing rapidly!

The UUA itself, has significant resources, including an annual income of about \$20 million. Another \$20 million from its Beacon Press publishing department, and I believe an additional between \$600,000-\$1 million from its smaller Skinner House department. Plus what the UUA collects in membership dues and other income-earning departments, enrollment programs, and investments.

I can only imagine the support available from the UUA to Member Congregations who are in need of assistance must be vast!

And, if that is not the case...if these early sentiments of sharing resources is not happening in meaningful ways today...I *wonder* what this Faith Tradition would look like if it lived in to The Cambridge Platform's vision of congregations engaging in the kind of fellowship where they met together regularly (When was the last time neighboring congregations got together - just for the fun of it?!) and congregations *offered financial support* to struggling churches?

What would Article II look like if the UUA had this kind of support to its members in mind?

As I researched the changes to Article II, I found myself drawn back to the core values that first attracted me to Unitarian Universalism.

As an interfaith minister, I have served UU congregations and programs across the U.S.A. from the pulpits, in workshops, retreats and even at General Assemblies.

And, despite the vast cultural differences in various parts of the country, there are three aspects that unite UU congregations:

- lighting the flaming chalice,
- the 6 Sources
- and the 7 Principles.

Surveys by UU World Magazine in 2016 and 2017 affirmed that these elements are among the most shared beloved things. by UUs, yet just a few years later, a decision was made to remove them from the UUA's bylaws.

And, that was a surprise to me.
And, apparently, a surprise to many others.

Yet, regardless of whether you support or oppose these changes, I encourage you to remember that the Unitarian Universalist faith tradition is characterized by its commitment to theological diversity, inclusivity, and social justice.

Certainly that remains true of this congregation!

This congregation is not rooted in dogma.

Members are not mandated to adhere to a creed or doctrine but are free to explore their own spiritual journeys.

In the broadest terms, *deferring to our religious roots*,
Unitarianism emphasizes human agency and
Universalism centers on the inclusion of everyone.

This congregation has long been guided by the 6 sources and 7 principles
and has affirmed its own values such as:

- individual spiritual growth,
- being a *welcoming* community,
- creative worship,
- service beyond self,
- and
- self-governance.

Your Congregational Mission reflects these values by

- promoting personal truth,
- spiritual growth,
- respect for diverse viewpoints,
- and
- a commitment to social justice.

You now have the opportunity, *should you choose to*,
use the 6 new UUA Values.

To any extent you wish to.

I suspect: some will like them, while others will not.

And, that is OK.

It is even expected.

I encourage you to do your own due diligence.

And, decide what is best for you.

Know that for congregations and individuals with concerns or simply wanting to explore more deeply into all aspects of Unitarian Universalism and liberal religion, the ***North American Unitarian Association (NAUA)*** offers a welcoming space to do just so. And, it is *free* for congregations and individuals to join!

Also, know that, the **UUA** has created resources to help congregations engage with its new Shared Values, including printable materials, artwork, and music. They have even identified songs in our current hymnals that place Love at the Center.

And...

If I may say....

This congregation has always placed Love at the Center.

May that Love continue to be *Guided by Faith.*

Amen.

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To schedule her for pulpit supply or to lead a workshop or retreat, email:

TwinkleManning@gmail.com