

THE THIRD PRINCIPLE

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When I was growing up, I saw God as something other people had access to in their lives and something I would never have in mine. My parents raised us agnostic and we almost never discussed religion. They made a conscious decision not to go to church based on their experiences with organized religion. As a result of being an “un-churched” family (or perhaps in spite of it), I had a huge curiosity about God and religion. I learned about religion from friends and on a few occasions I attended church with them. It seemed to me that their relationships with God were one-way, linear – and that the relationship was special and had to be earned - and it could be taken away.

When Dan and I got married I became a Catholic. I thought if I went to church enough, said enough Hail Mary’s and did my duty by volunteering in the church, I would be worthy of a relationship with God. But I still felt as if the “spiritual” connection was missing. I wondered if there was something wrong with me. Why wasn’t I connecting with God, or why wasn’t God connecting with me?

So I started a search for another path and I was fortunate to find UUCL in a gymnasium at the Purcellville Community Center in the early 1990's. I immediately realized this was the faith for me. As I've mentioned to many of you before - I had been a UU all my life, but I just didn't realized it until I walked into this warm, accepting and freeing community. It was the first time in my life that I realized I was the pilot of my spiritual path and it was normal and good to navigate the journey through many places – my chosen religious community, the beauty of nature, a song, a loving gesture or in mundane daily tasks like sweeping the floor.

I must say I was kind of selfish in my first several years as a UU. I had a lot of healing to do, a lot of exploring and sorting out, so I soaked up all of the spirituality I could from the church well. I saw the church as a place for me to “get” my spirituality from . . . a bank, of sorts, where I was making a lot of withdrawals and not very many deposits. But for me it was a necessary part of my spiritual growth.

I have come to realize that the journey is never ending and it is probably the same for others as well. It is important for me to continue learning, growing and living in covenant with my church and the larger

community in whatever ways I can. And the Seven UU Principles are a vital guide in that process.

While preparing this sermon about the Third Principle: The Acceptance of One Another and Spiritual Growth, I read a more in-depth explanation to get a better understanding of this very important principle.

Robert Hardies, senior minister of All Souls Church, Unitarian, in Washington, D.C. and editor of Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now, wrote a chapter on the Third Principle in the book, The Seven Principles in Word and Worship. Reverend Hardies described religion as “the faculty through which we try to make sense of the world and our place in it.”

Reverend Hardies urges us to “Love the contradictions” in life. He has written an article under that title (available on the UUA website), and I loved this quote from the article - “If our world is to survive in all its contradiction and complexity, it needs more people who are capable of loving it in its entirety.” This quote, I believe, most aptly captures or

explains the true meaning of the Third Principle. This is tall order, and I believe it requires a lot of faith.

Hardies shared a story in the chapter about a professor he had in divinity school who posed the question, “what is the size of your soul?” I found his professor’s description fascinating: He gives several examples of how to measure the size of your soul, but two of them were most interesting to me: the first is . . . *the range and depth of [a person’s] love*. During an open discussion at a summer service several years ago, the lay minister asked us to imagine if we could choose one thing for the world, would it be peace, love or freedom – I chose love, because if you approach challenges and the complexities of life with love you have a better chance of opening your heart to understanding and compassion. Another example he gave for measuring the depth of one’s soul was: *the intensity and variety of outlook you can entertain in the unity of your being without feeling defensive or insecure*. Hardies boiled it down to something simpler. He says the size of your soul is its’ . . . *ability to grow and expand, to stretch when life throws more contradictions your way.*”

He makes a profound observation about what kind of spirituality we need in order to grow and accept one-another. He says “We need a spirituality that moves us beyond fight and flight, one that sees complexity not as an enemy but as a friend. We need a spirituality that views paradox as a creative opportunity and contradiction as a stimulant. In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘With consistency, a great soul has simply nothing to do’.” And when Hardies asks, “But what kind of spirituality allows our souls to embrace contradiction and complexity?” I believe the answer is in our chosen faith – and I believe an example of the complexities of life where the UU faith can stand up and make a difference in the world is the rising tide of immigration issues in this country, especially the new laws in Arizona – a perfect example of the complexities in the world that require a greater understanding and acceptance of one-another.

While I was at the UU General Assembly in Minneapolis last month, a group of delegates had submitted a proposal to boycott the 2012 GA planned to meet in Phoenix Arizona. A meeting was held to discuss the issue and during one of the plenary sessions a compromise was presented

for a vote. The delegates of UU congregations (including myself) from across the country voted overwhelmingly to live our UU principles by making the 2012 General Assembly a “Justice GA.” All activities at the 2012 GA, except for required business, will work for justice on the issue of immigration. That is the Third Principle of our UU faith in action. From a personal level of spiritual growth, I’ve always found the UU church, whether in a gymnasium or a beautiful building, to be an inviting place to find spirituality. The chalice – our bowl of light; symbols of religions from around the world; the quaint although uncomfortable church pews; this beautiful structure - it gives me a sense of peace, light and presence. But this is not the only way to grow spiritually within our church.

The old model of God up in heaven and us here on earth looking up for guidance and direction is very linear. Hardies described this as the “Jack in the Beanstalk” theory of God – growing higher and higher up the beanstalk, closer to God until finally our heads are in the clouds.

For me, spiritual growth means finding God everywhere – as Peter Mayer says in his song from our meditation – Everything is Holy Now. Growing more internally and finding ways to impact my world externally as a result. Hardies learned from his professor that spiritual growth is not about a vertical ascent up to heaven, but about growth in every dimension at once – he calls it “Spirituality in 3-D” (I love that description).

For me, this means opening up my heart to things I have been afraid of, accepting people who I know little about. Trying to understand the things that make no sense to me – in other words, embracing the complexities of life.

As a Catholic, service to the church was my duty. And now that I am a UU, service to the church is more about the connection between spirituality and what I am doing in the church. Being able to see beyond our own needs and give from our heart and soul is a part of our own spiritual growth. Opportunities for growth also exist in the mundane – all the things on our “to do” list may not seem very spiritual, but sometimes

sweeping can be a wonderful form of meditation and the result is a clean floor that touches everyone who walks into the building.

But I often struggle with the question – am I doing enough for my church? While I balance my crazy life and try to find enough time to devote to the needs of my family and my job and squeeze in a little “me” time - how much time should I really be devoting to duties related to the church? I think it’s important to “do” for the church community, but I think it is also important not to “overdo” for the church community.

I believe there is a balance and it can be achieved by finding ways to support the church that help us grow spiritually – things that we can do that also enrich our heart and soul. It happens all the time in our church. When people who love children and believe that our UU principles really can change our world become RE teachers, they share a passion and knowledge that helps to open the hearts and minds of our children to the complexities of life, contributing to their growth and their spirituality. In turn, it can have the same effect on the teacher.

I have found that opportunities for growth sometimes find me. While I was working for Planned Parenthood, I had the occasion to stand beside a young woman who was having an abortion. When I was hired to do Public Relations and Public Affairs for Planned Parenthood in Northern Virginia, all new non-clinical staff were required to work in one of the Metro Washington clinics for at least a day or two to get a better understanding of the services that were provided. And it was a good thing, because my commitment to access to women's reproductive health services was pretty much an intellectual conviction. Planned Parenthood knew that we would be better equipped to go out there and support, promote, preserve and defend the clinics with this experience. I joined the counselor for the young woman's initial appointment and when she first came into the room, I thought to myself "why is this girl here? She's a beautiful, smart college girl who comes from a 'good' family and has all the opportunities in the world . . . how did she get here? Why did she let herself get pregnant? Why didn't she take birth control?"

I stood beside her as the staff prepared her for the procedure, and she looked over to me and asked if I would hold her hand. This was a moment of spiritual growth for me. I had no way of fully understanding this young woman's life, but I knew she needed human compassion, warmth and understanding to make it through this day. My heart opened and my soul grew. Being a part of her journey broadened my path for spiritual growth and acceptance.

I don't think any of us are ever finished growing spiritually. We will always have opportunities to learn new things and open our hearts to accept the world as it changes. The key to promoting acceptance of one-another and fostering spiritual growth in the world not only lies within us, but it also depends on our ability to broaden the impact of our faith in our community. One way we can do this is by expanding opportunities to engage people who are searching for us – searching for a loving, accepting and freeing faith community.

Hardies concludes his chapter on the Third Principle with this statement:

“Unitarian Universalism’s Third Principle sets before us a vision of our congregations as communities where spacious souls can flourish and grow. We grow souls on Sunday mornings when a sermon challenges and expands our thinking, or when music makes our spirits soar. We grow souls throughout the week in religious education classes for all ages, as we learn to discover the movement of the spirit in our lives. We grow souls when amidst the clamor of war, we struggle to find paths of peace. We grow souls in our covenant groups, learning together and caring for one another, recognizing in others’ stories our own experience. We grow souls when we engage with one another in congregational self-governance, learning through conflict and feeling the power of shared vision come into reality. The purpose of church is to provide spiritual sustenance for world engagement. Now more than ever, the world needs our congregations to be incubators of a generous, loving and justice-seeking spirituality.”

So what is your definition of spirituality? Have you thought about your spiritual growth? What is your image of God and how does it differ from when you were a child? Try to think of a time in your life when your

heart and soul were opened and if you are comfortable doing so, share that story with your partner, your children, your parents, your grandchildren or a member of our UU family. You may just foster spiritual growth as a result.