

Resources for Communities of Ongoing Religious Exploration

OCTOBER 2016: “the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process”

Suggested chalice lighting

I am not bound to win, but I am bound to be true. I am not bound to succeed, but I am bound to live up to what light I have. ~ Abraham Lincoln

I. Introduction

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Congregations, covenant to affirm and promote:

The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process in our congregations and in society at large.

A. Powell Davies led a committee of the American Unitarian Association tasked with advancing the faith in the 1940s, and drafted a list of five “working principles” shared by its members. The third of these was, “The democratic process in human relations”; “individual freedom of belief” was the first. In 1961, when the AUA joined with the Universalist Church of America to form the UUA, the third principle (of six) was, “to affirm, defend and promote the supreme worth of every human personality, the dignity of man, and the use of the democratic method in human relationships.”

Neither of these earlier statements included a reference to right of conscience. The principles, as they now appear, came into being in 1981 and were ratified by the Association in 1985. The tension between individual freedom and conscience, and collective wisdom and democratic decision, is evident in the juxtaposition of these to phrases in the same statement.

II. CONNECT: Readings

[Unitarianism] is an inclusive, not an exclusive faith, based on individual freedom of belief...finding salvation not through someone else's martyrdom, but by education and the disciplines of democracy...

A ...commitment of the Unitarian faith is to democracy – not merely as a political system but as the just and brotherly way in human relations. We think that discussion – is the path to true agreement. We are educators one of another, and all can learn from each. We are well aware that democracy can be a discipline – and sometimes a harsh one. But this is part of its value. We grow by learning to get along with other people.

~ A. Powell Davies, 1954

We in this denomination have confidence in the democratic process. We want to encourage others also to resist. We as a religious movement are qualified by our nature, our heritage and our recent experience to play a significant role at this time in our history to help resist and reverse the ominous trend toward regarding constitutional liberties. We can and we will.

Robert West, 1973

In our religious lives, the democratic process requires trust in the development of each individual conscience -- a belief that such development is possible for each of us, as well as a commitment to cultivate our own conscience. We could call it a commitment to the value of each person. In the words of Theodore Parker, "Democracy means not, 'I am as good as your are,' but 'You are as good as I am.'" My connection with the sacred is only as precious as my willingness to acknowledge the same connection in others.

Parisa Parsa, 2007

III. GROW

Questions for consideration and discussion

1. If someone violates the law because conscience dictates, is that person morally bound to accept the legal consequences of the action? Do you feel differently depending on whether you agree or disagree? (e.g., conscientious objectors to war, Freedom Riders, pharmacists refusing to dispense morning-after pill, probate judge refusing to issue marriage license).
2. Suppose a national vote results in the election of a President whose actions and character make that person unfit and dangerous according to the judgment of your conscience. What is the moral response?
3. Does the democratic process inevitably work toward an end of greater justice for all? Or does it require a common commitment to particular values or ideals (inherent worth and dignity, world peace, rule of law, national security, etc.) in order to function effectively?
4. What life experiences have given you greater confidence in the promise of democratic process? What experiences has given rise to doubt or skepticism?
5. When have you found that your own conscience was in conflict with requirements of law, of job duties, of membership in an organization, of the congregation?

IV. SERVE

The Fifth Principle is sometimes described as the way we act out the First Principle -- the inherent worth and dignity of every person. While that may be somewhat

oversimplified, it is clear that both our covenant to affirm the right of conscience, and our covenant to promote the use of democratic process, rest on a conviction that every person has an inalienable right to be heard and respected as a whole and autonomous human being.

The discipline of nonviolent communication, as developed by Marshall Rosenberg, is based on the idea that conflict arises from people trying to meet some need (security, safety, love, connection, etc.). More often than not, we are not consciously aware of our own unmet need that is provoking our anger, hurt, fear and resentment.

For the next seven days, beginning right now, make a deliberate effort to hear the need expressed by others with whom you are in conflict or disagreement. Set aside judgment of right and wrong. As you are able, offer attention rather than opinion.

If you see yourself reacting, let it go. Start again. It is natural for us to believe that, if people only knew the truth, they would agree with you. Remember that offering factual information and reasoned argument rarely, if ever, changes people's opinion. A change of mind begins with an opening of the heart.

V. Conclusion

Reflect on how this experience felt. Were there moments in which you felt uncomfortable? Confused? Anxious? Affirmed? Eager? Hopeful? Surprised? What other feelings did you encounter? What got in the way, and what was missing? If people in the group would like, allow them to share these things, without interrogation or challenge.

Suggested words for extinguishing chalice:

I do not pretend to understand the moral universe. The arc is a long one. My eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by experience of sight. I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice.