

Resources for Communities of Ongoing Religious Exploration

V.1 Unit 3

Seventh Principle: "... respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part."

Suggested chalice lighting

Every part of this earth is sacred...every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy...The earth is our Mother...We are part of the earth, and the earth is part of us...This we know, all things are connected like the blood which unites one family...we did not weave the web of life, we are merely a strand in it... and whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. ~ Chief Seattle

I. Introduction

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

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

When the Unitarians (AUA) and the Universalists (UCA) finally joined as as one body in 1961, they did so with the following statement:

In accordance with these corporate purposes, the members of the Unitarian Universalist Association, dedicated to the principles of a free faith, unite in seeking:

- 1. To strengthen one another in a free and disciplined search for truth as the foundation of our religious fellowship;*
- 2. To cherish and spread the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, immemorially summarized in the Judeo-Christian heritage as love to God and love to man;*
- 3. 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;*
- 4. To implement our vision of one world by striving for a world community founded on ideals of brotherhood, justice and peace;*
- 5. To serve the needs of member churches and fellowships, to organize new churches and fellowships, and to extend and strengthen liberal religion;*

6. *To encourage cooperation with men of good will in every land.*

The male-gendered language of the day is the first thing that most of us in the 21st century notice. There is one other striking difference from the Principles as updated in 1985. What we now know as the 7th principle did not appear in any form in the earlier set. While most of the wording of the current Principles and Purposes was new, most of the concepts appeared in one form or another in the 1961 statement -- but no number seven. The Rev. Walter Royal Jones Jr., who headed served as chair of the special committee tasked with updating the Principles, recalls "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part," Jones explains, had not been anticipated, yet "its inclusion was overwhelmingly mandated in the responses received from churches and fellowships, and its current happy wording emerged from the floor of the General Assembly, where it was instantly recognized as just the right language."

II. CONNECT: Readings

"Gaia is the Earth seen as a single physiological system, an entity that is alive at least to the extent that, like other living organisms, its chemistry and temperature are self-regulated at a state favorable for life. Gaia became visible through the new knowledge about Earth gained from space and from extensive investigations of the Earth's surface. It is concerned with the working of the whole system not with the separated parts of a planet divided arbitrarily into the biosphere, the atmosphere, the lithosphere and the hydrosphere."

~ James Lovelock, 1991

The following parable from the Buddhist canon provides a beautiful visual metaphor for the interdependence and interpenetration of all phenomena. Suspended above the palace of Indra, the Buddhist god who symbolizes the natural forces that protect and nurture life, is an enormous net. A brilliant jewel is attached to each of the knots of the net. Each jewel contains and reflects the image of all the other jewels in the net, which sparkles in the magnificence of its totality. When we learn to recognize what Thoreau refers to as "the infinite extent of our relations," we can trace the strands of mutually supportive life, and discover there the glittering jewels of our global neighbors. Buddhism seeks to cultivate wisdom grounded in this kind of empathetic resonance with all forms of life. ~ Daisaku Ikeda, 1996

"It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied together into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. We are made to live together because of the interrelated structure of reality . . . Before you finish eating breakfast in

the morning, you've depended on more than half the world. This is the way our universe is structured, this is its interrelated quality. We aren't going to have peace on Earth until we recognize the basic fact of the interrelated structure of all reality. "

~ Martin Luther King, Jr, 1967

Our seventh Principle, respect for the interdependent web of all existence, is a glorious statement. Yet we make a profound mistake when we limit it to merely an environmental idea. It is so much more. It is our response to the great dangers of both individualism and oppression. It is our solution to the seeming conflict between the individual and the group. Our seventh Principle may be our Unitarian Universalist way of coming to fully embrace something greater than ourselves. The interdependent web—expressed as the spirit of life, the ground of all being, the oneness of all existence, the community-forming power, the process of life, the creative force, even God—can help us develop that social understanding of ourselves that we and our culture so desperately need. It is a source of meaning to which we can dedicate our lives."

~ Forrest Gilmore, 2007

III. GROW

Questions for consideration and discussion

1. If you were to consider the foundational ideas or principles of your own value system or set of beliefs, would 'respect for the interdependent web of all existence' be one of them? Would you choose different words to express the idea?
2. The worlds of 1961 and 1985 looked different in many ways. Some have suggested that historical developments account for overwhelming support in 1985 of what was not considered in 1961. Others suggest scientific advances are the main cause. One alternative view is that it was necessary for the two movements to live in symbiotic partnership before this idea was established as a core religious principle. These are not the only possible explanations; what do you think?
3. Does the image of Gaia serve as a useful metaphor to understand the world in which we live? Can you conceive of Earth as a unified, living thing?
4. Is the Net of Indra an effective metaphor to describe the connectedness of all? Does it convey interdependence as well?
5. Dr. King refers to the connectedness of all humanity as an underlying reality that we must acknowledge. Rev. Gilmore suggests that we might even regard this connectedness as divine, even speaking of it as *God*. Do you find it meaningful

to consider it in these transcendent or mystical terms? Does such a view detract from seeing it as a scientific reality?

IV. SERVE

As you move through your days, consider the ways in which the interdependence of all things is visible in your life. As you prepare to eat, take a moment to look deeply at the many human hands who participated in the production of your food. Think of the generations of human activity that created the soil, the production of machinery, the irrigation and cultivation, and so on. Take that moment to experience gratitude for the many thousands of creatures, from the microscopic to the gigantic, that contributed. Pay attention to how your daily activities impact the environment. Consider your use of fossil fuel, your consumption and disposal of food materials, your interaction with plants and animals, and do not overlook your engagement with fellow human beings. Seek some small way in which you might lessen the detrimental impact, or increase the positive impact, that you have.

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:

Every step we make has the power to heal and transform. Not only can we heal ourselves by our steps, but we can help the Earth and the environment. ~ Thich Nhat Hanh