

Seven Principles, Seven Stars—Some thoughts from the Rev. Craig Moro

All Unitarian Universalists oppose bigotry and discrimination in every form. We reject any and all hierarchies of human beings based on physical characteristics. We reject any and all moral hierarchies based on sexual identity or preference, national origin, language, or religious affiliation. We reject the notion that the needs of the human species justify degradation of the natural environment at the expense of other species or the non-organic structures of that environment. We revere beauty as something far deeper than physical appearance. And we celebrate freedom.

We make all of this plain, not through negative statements, not by taking a hostile stance, but by a covenant to affirm and promote seven clear positive principles:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

These principles serve as seven guiding stars but stars are more than points of distant light. They have heat, and mass, and gravity. They pull us toward themselves while they also radiate power towards us, through us, and beyond us. Their pull and their penetration are *one*, indivisible, irresistible. Why would a *religious* movement ask (or settle) for less?

Each of these seven clearly meets the definition of a *principle*:

principle | noun: • a fundamental truth or proposition that serves as the foundation for a system of belief or behavior or for a chain of reasoning. • a rule or belief governing one's personal behavior.

Principles should be as close to *forever* and *always* in their scope and intent as we limited human beings can manage to put into words. They should also be easy to understand, even for those who may not agree with them completely (or at all). Ours move in a beautiful arc from the individual to society; to the Cosmos and back again—an open, expanding circle that includes everyone and everything. They end at the right moment, leaving us in reverent silence within the “interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part”. But here is the language of what is being proposed as an “8th UU principle”:

•“We will journey together toward spiritual wholeness by building a diverse, multicultural Beloved Community¹ by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.”

¹Note the capitalization, often reserved for “God” in religious statements elsewhere, but not elsewhere in our existing Principles statement except in its title.

This is clearly not a *principle*. Longer than the first three principles combined, it is a policy or mission statement that calls for active participation in an ongoing conflict between, among, and even *within* persons. All of our current 7 principles deny any real or lasting basis for such a conflict, saying in effect that: “We all are *one*. Our *differences* matter less than what *connects* us.” (Yes, the second of the Source statements that come after the Principles speaks of prophetic persons confronting “powers and structures of evil” but also calls our attention to how they do so “with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.”)

The language of the proposed 8th principle commits Unitarian Universalists to an endless war on a “racism” that’s conceived as both an enemy without and an enemy within. Of course, soldiers in a war need *discipline*. The command to “accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions” suggests the possibility of disciplinary measures to be enacted against those who do not or will not participate. We see this happening now in the recent silencing and punishment of ministers who conscientiously object to this militarizing spirit. The idea of being “accountable” for the sincerity or effectiveness of our actions, thoughts, or feelings as ordered participants in an ongoing conflict is unprecedented in Unitarian Universalism.

To whom must we make such an *accounting*? Under threat of what sanctions, punishment, or other discipline? Who makes the determination about what is “racism” or in what, where, or whom we find it? Each individual UU? Or will there be a panel (or local panels) of judges?

Ibram X. Kendi² proposes that we establish and permanently fund a

“... Department of Anti-racism (DOA) comprised of formally trained experts on racism and no political appointees. The DOA would be responsible for preclearing all local, state and federal public policies to ensure they won’t yield racial inequity, monitor those policies, investigate private racist policies when racial inequity surfaces, and monitor public officials for expressions of racist ideas. The DOA would be empowered with **disciplinary tools to wield over and against** policymakers and public officials who do not voluntarily change their racist policy and ideas.”

Please read this statement carefully and give it some thought. Is the UUA proposing some version of Kendi’s “DOA”? Would most of our members be comfortable with such a permanent department at the UUA, or such a committee in their local congregations? Or perhaps it would be some sort of unelected, unimpeachable traveling “Racism Assessor” appointed by the UUA to check on our ideas and use “**disciplinary tools to wield over and against**” us when we fall short in or disagree with their assessment of our thoughts, words, and actions? Are we happy with this authoritarian vision of “the faith of the free”?

•It is easy to imagine “accountable dismantling” taking even more troubling turns. If we are measuring and keeping accounts now as part of our UU experience, those who dismantle more “racism” might seem to “count” more (or hold more in their

² <https://www.politico.com/interactives/2019/how-to-fix-politics-in-america/inequality/pass-an-anti-racist-constitutional-amendment/>

“accounts”) than others among us. The more “racism” I “dismantle”, the higher I will stand, the more I will “count”. As an active **Dismantler UU**, I will count more than a **Non-dismantler UU**. Will our prowess at “dismantling” now be assessed and measured as a regular part of our UU experience? Should we all expect to receive grades at the end of each church year, or titles: *Dismantler Level One, Dismantler Level Two, Gold Star Dismantler*? Is this what we really want? What’s next?

- This is also easy to imagine, especially after the many real world examples we have seen in recent years. The most numerically countable/“accountable” way to dismantle institutional oppressions would be *to reduce the number of oppressor organizations and/or the number of their members*. Such notions of “accountable dismantling” under a religious mantle have become very familiar to us since 9-11-2001.³ Should we be completely surprised if some feel they must take “dismantling” to this next level in acts of explosive witness?

If this seems exaggerated, please consider recent actions by the new discipline-and-punish incarnation of the UU Minister’s Association as it has worked to destroy the careers and reputations of minister after minister in recent years. (UUMA victims have also suffered extreme health effects which seriously impact their families.) Look at the banning of dissenting ministers from formerly welcoming pulpits. Look at the attempts to physically destroy their books and to encourage social media “pile-ons” in which hundreds of so-called ministers condemn a colleague’s words before even reading them. Look at some of the comments posted on militant “UU” websites

Do we really want to see more “passionate” UUs? Should we be guided by the actions we’ve seen by other “passionate” believers and the extremes to which they are willing to go? Won’t passionate believers on the “other side” be encouraged to respond by doing more of the same? We can see in the “8th principle” a vision of the children of light locked in eternal struggle with the children of darkness—one of the worst ideas that religion has to offer. William Butler Yeats reminded us how in a time of frustrated upheaval like ours, “The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.”

- I think that we can do better. Our seven existing principles show us how. They respond to all forms of bigotry and oppression by reaching *beyond* them, not by locking horns in battle.

An Alternate Placement for the Proposed “8th Principle” Language

The proposed 8th Principle is a house of cards that stands only if we agree that there is substantial “racism” already (or permanently) present in ourselves and our UU institutions. But this is not an assertion to which all UUs agree. Nor have we been honestly asked to share our thoughts about it in a truly open debate or by means of

³ Of course the 9-11 attackers no more represent Islam than our own militants represent the UU way!

a universal, confidential ballot or survey⁴. This is not sufficient grounds for changing the spirit of our carefully crafted core document from one of peace to one of conflict.

Make no mistake: The “8th Principle” has been promoted by deeply caring people who are concerned about pervasive injustices. Speaking and sharing the words they have composed is very important for them, and they should not be scorned because their cherished words do not express what can be properly called a “principle”.

An alternative sits right in front of us. The UU **Purposes** Statement is essentially our mission statement, and such statements not “forever and always” but are reviewed on a much more regular basis than core principles (usually every 5 years or so). We could suggest that—since it seems so important to a large number of us to speak these words liturgically and to see them in print on documents—they might have a temporary home in the UU Purposes statement. The logical place is just before the closing paragraph that disavows and prohibits any “creedal test” for UUs:

“Purposes of the Unitarian Universalist Association (proposed new language in green)

The Unitarian Universalist Association shall devote its resources to and exercise its corporate powers for religious, educational and humanitarian purposes. The primary purpose of the Association is to serve the needs of its member congregations, organize new congregations, extend and strengthen Unitarian Universalist institutions and implement its principles.

The Association declares and affirms its special responsibility, and that of its member societies and organizations, to promote the full participation of persons in all of its and their activities and in the full range of human endeavor without regard to race, color, sex, disability, affectional or sexual orientation, age, or national origin and without requiring adherence to any particular interpretation of religion or to any particular religious belief or creed.

We will journey together toward spiritual wholeness by building a diverse, multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.

Nothing herein shall be deemed to infringe upon the individual freedom of belief which is inherent in the Universalist and Unitarian heritages or to conflict with any statement of purpose, covenant, or bond of union used by any society unless such is used as a creedal test.”*

*(We can think of this last statement as our *freedom clause*. We might also ask if the underlined statement just above it already does the work of the statement in green. We must interrogate the notion that we are personally or institutionally “racist” in spite of our own self-understanding (as corporate trainer Robin DiAngelo might assert) by asking if this does not in effect require of us “adherence to [a] particular interpretation of religion or to any particular religious belief or creed.”)

⁴ This proclamation that Unitarian Universalist institutions and members are contaminated by “white supremacy culture” was—from reports that I have heard—decided at a 90-minute Zoom meeting on April 6, 2017 by only 16 mostly white UU leaders and observers in the wake of two crises: the election of Donald Trump and the sudden resignation of UUA President Peter Morales. The proclamation was a reactive move and not the result of any widespread polling, study, or independent assessment. It has had outsized consequences for our religious movement. For a critical review of the later (2020) *Widening the Circle of Concern* “survey”, please see the UU Multi-racial Unity Action Council’s Spring newsletter (https://5aec3e84-7112-4d05-bab2-4660d65d6bfa.filesusr.com/ugd/51a1b4_7099e3603b9f448ba71dc1da0aad7638.pdf) The review begins on page 16.

For responses by mostly Black public thinkers to the theoretical basis for the “8th Principle” project and other current UUA efforts, please see **Appendix B**, below.

Many will still object to the conflict-oriented nature of the language in green, but the “freedom clause” below it should help make clear that no one can be drafted to participate in any “accountable dismantling” of “racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions” that others have defined for them, **over and against** their own conscience and understanding of themselves and their institutions.

Our principles are a vital part of what makes us who we are, and they must only be changed after the deepest and fullest debate and discussion that we can manage, which calls for certain concrete process imperatives:

1) A Return to a free UU “press”

Our 5th Principle is “the right of conscience and the use of democratic process within our congregations and in society at large”. A free press is vital to that process.

After the death of King John Sigismund, Catholic rulers tried to crush the early Unitarians by denying them access to the printing presses that they had used so skillfully. Some, like Andrew Eössi, responded by distributing handmade copies of hymns, sermons, and essays so they could continue to speak and share their truth.

Recently I found in my files an old (2004) copy of the *UU World* magazine and noticed that it included seven pages of letters to the editor, mostly voicing courteous dissent from views expressed in earlier articles or proposals made by UUA leaders while offering thoughtful alternative views/proposals. Along with the dissenting and questioning articles that used to appear in the magazine, these letters provided a healthy representation of diverse viewpoints among our members. Seven pages!

But take a look now at any recent copy of the *World*, and try to find *any* letters to the editor, let alone a letter of dissent. Try to find even one *word* of disagreement with recent UU management policies or executive actions. Dissenting opinions or alternative proposals from UU lay members now have no place in our “official” publications or our annual General Assembly. Our “press” has in effect been seized turned over to prosecution of the “war” that is reflected in the language of the “8th Principle”, described on page 2 above—a change that to my knowledge dates precisely to the 2017 meeting mentioned in the footnote on p.4.

In keeping with UU leadership’s current wartime stance, our press has been seized, and our access to it denied (although our money is still warmly welcomed during what is becoming a *crackdown* on free thought and discussion. Such crackdowns are unfortunately quite common during times of other kinds of war.)

We must demand that our press be returned to us and assert our right to speak freely at all UU assemblies.

2) Informed universal voting on **any** change to our core documents

Right now, the proposed 8th principle is being pushed by UUA administrative officials who do not offer any real opportunity for discussion. Their so-called “information” page functions more as a promotion page that offers no real analysis and raises no serious questions. They are hoping to hustle the statement through to a General Assembly vote. Such votes are cast by less than 1.3% of UU members.

Changing our core principles is a momentous act that should not be the result of such slim participation. When I moved from Illinois to Oregon, I was very impressed to witness this state’s ballot initiative process, especially the opportunity to read pro and con statements in the voter pamphlet. A lasting—if not permanent—change to the fundamental document of a religious movement like ours should never be made without similar vigorous discussion, including thorough presentations both for and against and also about process. Nor should it be made without a well-informed vote from every member of every UU congregation.

We must demand the distribution of such voter’s pamphlets and that every UU have an opportunity to vote by secret ballot, not a public show of hands susceptible to the pressures of “group-think”.

Closing Words

I have tried in the pages above to make clear why I feel that the proposed “8th Principle” is not a principle and how it reduces and impoverishes the meaning of our Unitarian Universalist movement and contradicts its positive and dynamic spirit. At the same time I have tried to emphasize that this is not the intention of its authors and promoters. I believe that by a closer study of an often-neglected portion of our core document—the Purposes statement—we can see how the heartfelt cry for justice expressed in the proposed “8th Principle” has already been more effectively expressed in a way that’s much more in keeping with our free faith tradition.

Thank you for taking time to read these thoughts on a vitally important subject. [See also the Appendix A below.] Please feel free to share them with others who might be interested. I also encourage you to participate in the upcoming workshops on serving justice without labeling others or enflaming the culture wars, led by Ugandan-American author Irshad Manji and hosted by our Salem and Spokane UU congregations.

--Rev. Craig Moro

Appendix A: Comparative Language placement

The Principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association (proposed new language in green)

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

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- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part
- **We will journey together toward spiritual wholeness by building a diverse, multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.**

Purposes of the Unitarian Universalist Association (proposed new language in green)

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Appendix B: Response by Public Thinkers to “White Fragility” and Other Popular Explanatory Models

These are links to articles and discussions, mostly among Black public thinkers. I hope you’ll take the time to read or watch them all:

<https://www.persuasion.community/p/john-mcwhorter-the-neoracists>
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O3JJ633Pf_0
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UAdzsh0HsqM>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZuvhrXM3v7U&t=6s>
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m7A-YbEm2Fk&feature=emb_logo
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8LHXSgmmhuk>