

**Where Are We Going**  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver  
May 19, 2024

**Reflection on the Theme by John Hennessy**

It was June, 2004. My youngest daughter, Molly, had just graduated from South High in Eugene. She was just 18 years old, happy and excited with the prospect of no more school and a future life of endless possibilities. So, she and some friends celebrated with a camping trip to eastern Oregon. They packed up some camping gear and headed out east on Hwy. 126 to Bend, OR. There's lots of campgrounds right near town, so they found a close one and settled in. One of the kids had brought an alcohol stove along but after lighting it, they couldn't see the flame. They were bending over trying to get it going when Molly's classmate walked up and said, "Here. Maybe it needs more fuel." Not realizing the stove was still lit, and that an alcohol flame is invisible, she started to pour the highly flammable liquid into the stove. It instantly exploded in a huge ball of flaming hot liquid, soaking Molly's Tee shirt in the fuel, and setting her on fire! By the time they got some water and a blanket to put the flames out, Molly had been badly burned over 20% of her body. With my daughter screaming in agony, they got her in the car and drove to nearby St. Charles Bend Hospital which luckily was less than 10 minutes away.

Unfortunately, that hospital has no burn center, and after the doctors observed Molly for a couple of hours, they realized that her injury was beyond their capabilities. The staff arranged for a local pilot to fly her to PDX, and from there an ambulance took her to Emanuel Children's Hospital in Portland, which has an advanced Burn Center. My ex-wife Debbie had called me and told me what had happened, and I agreed to come down from Vancouver to see her at Emanuel. I was the first to see her after the accident. It was bad.

When I arrived, the nurses were just wheeling Molly into an intensive care unit. She looked like a mummy, wrapped in gauze all over her upper chest and arms, and was already heavily sedated. In the following weeks, she would undergo a series of excruciatingly painful skin graft surgeries. When I finally saw her again, a few months later, I was shocked at the disfigurement. Her skin on her upper chest and both arms looked as if it had been melted. The scars were hideous. The doctors offered her a special cosmetic procedure to level the scarring. She refused, saying that she "would live with the scars, for they were now part of her." When my wife later took her to Old Navy to buy her some new clothes, she expected her to pick high collars and long sleeves. Instead, Molly wanted tank tops and low-cut Tee shirts. Her total acceptance of her appearance amazed and humbled me. It still does. She wears her scars like a Badge of Honor. That summer my daughter gave me a powerful lesson in courage. She is still teaching me that lesson. And her life has now become a beautiful miracle.

**Weeds © Stuart Campbell – 11-2018 (Revised 5-2024)**

I'm a weed in your driveway, I can crack concrete  
That's why you won't keep me down

You can cut, pull, or poison, but it won't kill my roots  
That's why you won't keep me down

My will to survive, it's like nothing you've seen  
That's why you won't keep me down

I take fields of raw dirt, and turn them to flowers  
That's why you won't keep me down

**I'm a weed in your driveway and time's on my side, Sunshine and rain, these are allies of mine  
There are millions of us, and we have no regrets, It's been ten thousand years  
You've not beaten us yet**

People are like weeds; we never stop growing  
That's why you won't keep us down

We are working for peace, in a world that needs changing  
That's why you won't keep us down

Sticking together, through thick and through thin  
That's why you won't keep us down

You'll may bend us but not break us, we will be back around  
That's why you won't keep us down

**We are millions and millions and time's on our side, our kindness and love will prevail in time  
Like waves on the ocean, we'll never be still, we have the resolve  
And a whole lot of will**

There's a new generation, coming up strong  
That's why you won't keep them down

They are young and creative, and setting new rules  
That's why you won't keep them down

They have taken our wisdom, our love and respect  
that's why you won't keep them down

New focus, new passions, new hope in the air  
That's why you won't keep them down

**Like seeds from sequoias they are ready to sprout, step out of the way if you can't help them out  
It won't be that easy, but they don't know defeat, time's on their side  
They're breaking through concrete**

Our will to survive is like nothing you've seen, that's why you won't keep us down  
We're like weeds in your driveway, we can crack concrete, that's why you won't keep us down

***Where Are We Going@* by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert**

*There's a new generation, coming up strong  
They are young and creative, and setting new rules*

I do love that song. I love the tenacity of weeds.

We held the flower ritual last week, and I always have a little bowl of water for those tiny weeds that children bring to the service: Small white clover, dandelions, buttercups – children see the beauty in the weeds that adults have often forgotten, sometimes because we have long categorized them as weeds and think of them as unwanted.

By seeing the flowers the weeds produce as flowers, as beautiful, children remind us of what many of us no longer recognize...

*There's a new generation, coming up strong  
They are young and creative, and setting new rules*

I love John's story of his daughter – well, I don't like the fact that his daughter was injured, but that fact that she survived and thrived and taught John a lesson in how to love one's body - imperfections, scars and all. In a culture that values some bodies over other bodies, and certain looking bodies over other bodies, white bodies over brown bodies, and thin bodies over fat ones, able bodies over ones with impairments – it is counter-cultural to love ones body with all its imperfections and ways it does not fit the "ideal."

*My will to survive, it's like nothing you've seen  
That's why you won't keep me down*

This song Stuart wrote fits our theological perspective – that we are one, that there is a unity, we are unitarian, and that we are all loved, worthy of love, universally loved, universalist. Even we who are categorized as weeds are one with the universe and loved, and you can't keep us down. "It hurts to be me" said the woman Shane Scalf talked about meeting at the Portland Rescue Mission. He went on to say, "This is one thing I think most everyone can relate to. I don't think it hurts to be me always. I just think most people can relate to that feeling in moments of shame or regret. This is one area I feel all people can relate to and have empathy for other humans no matter their circumstance." He went on to say, "I now know suffering is not a badge of honor but it has given me the appreciation of the suffering of others. In order to thrive in this world, we need each other!" Amen.

This morning's sermon is the fourth in a series I've been giving leading up to the vote at General Assembly on updating our bylaws, specifically the section which we often refer to as the Principles and Purposes. I began the series with my own personal spiritual journey. *Who Am I?* I think I told my early story in part because it was pretty early in high school when I determined that I wanted to be a UU minister, though it took a number of years before I acted on that desire. Then, I told our collective journey – that is, history of Unitarian Universalism. *How Did We Get Here?* That history is more a history of ideas than of people, but I included people in that history that are often ignored, like Amy Scott, a free Black woman who was a founding member of the Universalist Society in Philadelphia in 1790.

*There are hundreds of thousands of us, and we have no regrets,  
It's been two thousand years, You've not beaten us yet.*

Then, in *What Keeps Us Here?*, I explored some of the grounding theological ideas that feed us spiritually and keep us involved in this counter-cultural Unitarian Universalist faith.

We took a break from the series to hear from Shane Scalf, the Executive Director of Family Promise of Clark County, and then to hold our flower service. This morning is the fourth and final in the series, and more directly about the bylaw changes coming before the General Assembly in a month.

When I told my spiritual journey, I talked about having been a young adult delegate in 1983 one of the years we voted on the language currently in our bylaws. Here they are. You can also find them on the early pages of our hymnal. It says: *We, the Member Congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote.*

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

These principles which were adopted in 1984 were followed then by 5 sources. This was the part I objected to because it was a partial list of potential sources and I was sure it wasn't complete, that we'd have to add to it over time. But here's the list from 1984:

Unitarian Universalism draws from many Sources:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a 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

It was the next General Assembly I ever attended, 11 years later in Spokane, that we added the 6<sup>th</sup> source – confirming my earlier conviction that the list was incomplete.

- 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.

That was the same General Assembly that Stuart – my husband – our featured musician this morning, turned to me as we left what is called the Service of the Living Tradition in which we recognize newly minted ministers, Stuart turned to me as we left that service and said, “so when are you going to do it?” – meaning, when was I going to become a minister. That started a discussion between us that led us to move to Chicago three years later to attend seminary. But back to the language:

Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.

In 2017-18, we updated the second source to read:

- Words and deeds of prophetic *people* which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love

All these words were an improvement over the language that had been adopted in 1961 at the point of merger between the AUA – American Unitarian Association, and the UCA – the Universalist Church of America forming the Unitarian Universalist Association. So you get a flavor of the original, here they are:

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.

So, in 1983, we delegates from member congregations in the UUA, voted to update the language – driven in part by the use of the term “men” to stand in for all people, but there were other issues with the language. The bylaws call for Article II – the name of this section of the bylaws- to be reviewed every 15 years, even though it took 23 years for that first revision. 11 years to add the 6<sup>th</sup> source, and proposed changes before the 2009 General Assembly were voted down. So it has now been nearly 30 years since the 6<sup>th</sup> source was added, 6 years since we changed “prophetic women and men” to “prophetic people,” and forty years since the big revision. As you heard in the charge to the study commission, they were charged with another big revision.

The article II study report says “There have been many projects, resolutions, task forces and other strategies that have come from the Board, the Commission on Appraisal and grassroots groups which encourage us to take a look at our principles, purposes, bylaws and rules. It is time for us to do a review

and make changes so that we are living into the Unitarian Universalism of the future, a Unitarian Universalism that holds us in times of great need and ethical, moral and spiritual crises. We are in one of those times now. In response to those discussions, the UUA Board committed to establishing this Article II Study Commission to consider possible amendments to this Article.”

“Over the course of its work, the Commission engaged in 45 feedback sessions, with 4,611 total participants. Their videos reached 7,765 viewers, and their 29 surveys generated a total of 10,925 responses.”

This work was begun in June of 2020. This timeline begins in the Fall of 2020 and shows 11 activities such as draft language, focus groups, surveys, interviews, etc. leading up to this year’s vote on the final version in June of 2024.

As you’ll recall, there was not much happening in June of 2020 – or at least not much happening that wasn’t online or in the streets. If this congregation was late the party – and by that I mean, if you didn’t know this was happening, that there was a study commission looking at the purposes and principles, well, it’s not very surprising. Many of us were otherwise distracted – trying to figure out how to do church and school and go on with our lives while people were dying of COVID-19 and police misconduct. By the end of that year more than 350,000 deaths in this country would be attributed to COVID-19.

And to be fair, there are many resolutions and commissions begun at General Assemblies that never meet the light of day, so I think once these revisions took hold and began to be known, it came as a shock to some who were otherwise distracted. It is my conviction that the problem is not that a big revision is being proposed, but that we hadn’t been reviewing the language every 15 years as originally planned.

I like what the commission has done. I think 7 words are easier to remember than 7 principles. JETPIG is the acronym folks are using to remember the 6 words of Justice, Equity, Transformation, Pluralism, Interdependence and Generosity. Love is at the center, to make 7. Each word comes with affirmation of the value, followed by our promise to uphold it.

“Section C-2.2. Values and Covenant. As Unitarian Universalists, we covenant, congregation-to-congregation and through our association, to support and assist one another in our ministries. We draw from our heritages of freedom, reason, hope, and courage, building on the foundation of love. Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values. We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of Love. Inseparable from one another, these shared values are”

I’m starting with Justice because I like that JETPIG acronym so much, but the actual bylaws begin with the word Interdependence. I’ve just re-arranged the value words because I think it helps us remember them. Also, the value of justice, of dismantling racism, is another impetus to this revision. There had been an 8<sup>th</sup> principle proposed to accompany those 7 we read earlier that named working toward a diverse multicultural Beloved Community and accountably dismantling racism and other oppressions. Instead of adding that principle to the 7, the commission reworked them all. But I really like how they worked this into upholding the value of Justice. It reads:

**“Justice.** We work to be diverse multicultural Beloved Communities where all thrive.

“We covenant to dismantle racism and all forms of systemic oppression. We support the use of inclusive democratic processes to make decisions within our congregations, our Association, and society at large.

**“Equity.** We declare that every person has the right to flourish with inherent dignity and worthiness. “We covenant to use our time, wisdom, attention, and money to build and sustain fully accessible and inclusive communities.

**“Transformation.** We adapt to the changing world.

“We covenant to collectively transform and grow spiritually and ethically. Openness to change is fundamental to our Unitarian and Universalist heritages, never complete and never perfect.

**“Pluralism.** We celebrate that we are all sacred beings, diverse in culture, experience, and theology.

“We covenant to learn from one another in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We embrace our differences and commonalities with Love, curiosity, and respect.

**“Interdependence.** We honor the interdependent web of all existence. With reverence for the great web of life and with humility, we acknowledge our place in it.

“We covenant to protect Earth and all beings from exploitation. We will create and nurture sustainable relationships of care and respect, mutuality and justice. We will work to repair harm and damaged relationships.

**“Generosity.** We cultivate a spirit of gratitude and hope.

“We covenant to freely and compassionately share our faith, presence, and resources. Our generosity connects us to one another in relationships of interdependence and mutuality.”

By the way, *generosity* is the only word I couldn’t find in our current language. And personally, I value it highly. I’m not always good at practicing it, but I want to be more generous. It is countercultural to this white supremacy culture we are seeped in that values competition and perfectionism, power hoarding and paternalism. In contrast, Robin Wall Kimmerer teaches us Indigenous wisdom in *Braiding Sweetgrass* which says (and I’m quoting):

“Know the ways of the ones who take care of you, so that you may take care of them. Introduce yourself. Be accountable as the one who comes asking for life. Ask permission before taking. Abide by the answer. Never take the first. Never take the last. Take only what you need. Take only that which is given. Never take more than half. Leave some for others. Harvest in a way that minimizes harm. Use it respectfully. Never waste what you have taken. Share. Give thanks for what you have been given. Give a gift, in reciprocity for what you have taken. Sustain the ones who sustain you and the earth will last forever.”

*I take fields of raw dirt, and turn them to flowers. That’s why you won’t keep me down.*

When I asked Stuart to sing the song, *Weeds*, for this service, I didn’t quite know why I had the impulse – I knew I liked the song. But it wasn’t lost on me that the leaders of this service – John, Stuart, Allison, Karen, and I are all of a certain age – and not exactly where we are going. We’re not the next generation of Unitarian Universalists, but rather the last. One of my reasons for supporting these revisions to our bylaws is that they were led by a commission that included young adults and African Americans and those of the next generation – and I may not understand it all, but I know I don’t want to be in their way.

We come from a long tradition – our values have not changed, I believe, but we have amplified and clarified them and work to embody them and our language changes to reflect new understandings and speak to new generations.