

## Theological Interpretations of the Ends

By Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan

Ours is a *covenantal faith*, in which we make promises to one another that seek to uphold the principles of Unitarian Universalism and make manifest the ideals to which we aspire. We are governed by congregational polity, taken from the *Cambridge Platform (1648)*, which was based upon the model of the early Christian church. Our congregation is self-governed, guided by our group consciousness and the use of the democratic process in all our affairs. We believe that our collective action, discernment, and capacity for goodness are stronger than what any of us have as individuals.

*Love is the only doctrine of our church.* We come together as a congregation, celebrating and honoring the diversity of our members and friends, and drawing upon the gifts of our diversity and theological plurality. We know that we do not do this alone, for there is an abiding spirit within and among us, which we call love, which guides us in our journey together.

Our *Affirmation of Faith* states that:

Love is the doctrine of this church,  
The quest of truth is its sacrament,  
And service is its prayer.  
To dwell together in peace,  
To seek knowledge in freedom,  
To serve humankind in fellowship,  
To the end that all souls shall grow into harmony with the Divine  
Thus do we covenant with each other and with God.

*Using this affirmation as our bedrock, our values as our light, and our mission as our focus*, we collectively agree to work toward the following ends. *These ends are akin to the pillars of our faith community. Taken together, they create a scaffolding for our work, guiding our gifts and resources of money, people, and time.*

The ends are interdependent, working in unison to further our mission and sustain our values. They do not work alone, nor do they compete for our resources or attention. We recognize that the prominence of each individual end will ebb and flow according to the rhythm of the church year, the lives of our members and friends, and the circumstances of the world around us. We understand these ends to be organic, growing and evolving as we do, collectively and individually. We promise to be open to that evolution and to reconsider the expression of these ends on a regular basis, modifying their expression and focus as needed.

We promise to hold ourselves and each other accountable to the pursuit of these ends, assuming good intention in our collective work, while understanding mistakes will be made and can be corrected without shame. We promise to learn together, work together and love together for the good of each person, the whole congregation, and the wider community of which we are a

part. We are accountable to our consciences, God as we understand God, one another, our neighbors, the larger Unitarian Universalist tradition, and our Association of congregations.

## ENDS

For purpose of illustration, each end is connected to one of the *seven Unitarian Universalist principles*. In reality, every end advances most, if not all, seven principles. Each end is also illustrated by a quote from a Unitarian, Universalist, or Unitarian Universalist. There is an abundance to chose from; these are just a few.

*Together we, across the lifespan:*

### **1. Connect to spirituality, joy, and wonder in diverse worship and music experiences that develop lives of courage, meaning, hope, and love.**

Advances the 4th Principle: A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

*There is religion in everything around us, a calm and holy religion in the unbreathing things in Nature. It is a meek and blessed influence, stealing in, as it were, unaware upon the heart. It is that which uplifts the spirit within us ... and which opens to our imagination a world of spiritual beauty and holiness. John Ruskin*

*Worship and music are the glowing center of our congregation*, from which we draw on the indwelling spirit of love, renewal, and wisdom. We are open to the spirit of mercy, love, and compassion that moves in and among us as we worship. This experience of communal worship sets church apart from other things in our life. It is also where many people are introduced to our faith. We gratefully welcome everyone who comes to worship with us, whether in bow ties or yoga pants. We embrace the truth that we are changed for the better by all who gather and are grateful for the opportunity.

Each time we gather for worship and music is a sacred occasion, and thereby an opportunity for transformation. Worship and music seek to open our hearts to joy and wonder, illuminate our minds with truth and intellectual rigor, and embolden our will to work for justice in this world. Therefore, we treat it with the sanctity it deserves.

Worship and music, among other things, inform our actions, broaden our perceptions, and deepen our intellect, faith, and interior life. It is something we return to, again and again, as fellow participants in our faith community.

Worship and music offer respite, renewal, and comfort in times of weariness or need. We participate in worship as well through the warm embrace of community and friends, offering understanding, compassion, and strength to each other. We recognize all who gather as equal in worth and dignity with gifts to share. We learn and grow from the theological, cultural, and racial diversity of our members, friends, and guests, and integrate our learnings into our lives. Worshipping together makes us stronger, more resilient, and more compassionate.

We draw on the sacred texts and writings of world religions, poetry, and world literature as sources of inspiration and models of living to further our collective and individual spiritual journeys. We have a *covenant of shared ministry* built upon the *priesthood of all believers*. We honor and respect the spiritual leadership, wisdom, and experience of our settled minister and other ordained clergy. We also bear witness to, honor, and respect the same in all our members and friends, knowing that we are all ministers to each other.

Our worship creates space to celebrate and make sacred the *life passages of our members* including child dedications, marriages, new member ceremonies, celebrations of life, and other passages and commitments. Children and youth are a vital part of our worship and music. Their participation in it makes it richer for all of us and helps instill in them the traditions of our faith and the power, purpose, and gift of worship in their individual lives.

**2. Articulate our individual and congregational Unitarian Universalist identity, deepen our understanding of it, teach it to our children, and live it in the world.**

Advances 3rd Principle: Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.

*While faith has aspects that are internal and personal, it is best supported and sustained in a community with shared symbols, stories, traditions and values. Unitarian Universalist faith development emphasizes each person's religious journey, each person's lifelong process of bringing head, heart and hands to seeking and knowing ultimate meaning as part of beloved religious community. Rev. Dr. Thandeka*

*Unitarian Universalism is a living faith, meaning that while it is steadfast in its adherence to our Unitarian Universalist principles, it is ever evolving in its understanding of how best to live into those principles. Revelation, or understanding of life and spirituality, is not sealed. By committing to a lifetime of learning and spiritual devotion, we make space for connection to the reality of this ongoing process of evolution, revolution and revelation.*

Ours is a faith based on promises and personal responsibility. Promise making, or covenanting, is a critical part of our faith and thus our spirituality. We promise to support one another in our faith journeys, offering opportunities to learn, share, and reflect together. We hold this commitment to be critical to the wellbeing and ongoing spiritual maturation of our congregation and our members and friends.

We promise to make our faith real and relevant by supporting one another in the sacred struggle to articulate our personal beliefs and how to apply them in our lives. We understand faith formation and spiritual exploration to be a *lifelong, ever evolving journey*, unique to each individual, made stronger by learning together. We experience our faith by what we learn and by how we act in our lives. We commit to ongoing learning, action, and reflection, understanding the need for and value of each. This learning is a priority of the congregation and built into all that we do.

Though our minister, supported by the professional staff, is our spiritual leader, we are all students, and we are all teachers. We learn and grow together, and offer this same opportunity to all ages, and everyone in the congregation, at all stages of life. We share these learning opportunities with the wider community as appropriate and invite them to help us learn as well. Learning is a reflection of the role of *reason and intellectualism* in our faith formation, as well as a *spiritual discipline*.

### **3. Foster an authentic intergenerational church community.**

Advances the 7th Principle: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

*Alone, our vision is too limited to see all that must be seen and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, there is more hope, and more help for us all on this small blue planet. Rev. Bill Sinkford*

*All of us need all of us to make it. Rev. Theresa Soto*

As a faith built on *relationship and connection*, we honor the gifts of all of our members and friends and recognize them as gifts of the spirit made manifest in each individual. We intentionally create opportunities that foster and strengthen the gift of our *intergenerational community of faith*. All people, of all ages, contribute to making our congregation what it is. All people are equally important. The value of a person is not determined by age, education, or prominence in society. The beauty of relationships across the ages is exquisite and offers gifts to everyone. Our intergenerational commitment crosses all areas of church life including worship, lifelong faith formation and spiritual exploration, justice work, fellowship, and care for one another.

We recognize the gifts every age brings to our church community and the need and benefit to everyone of being in relationship with people of all ages. We recognize the decreasing presence of intergenerational communities in the larger society as families change in how and where they live, often not living close to one another, and that other organizations also struggle to offer such opportunity. The church is a natural place to develop *lifelong relationships across the ages*, where all people benefit. We integrate such a perspective into our programming and church culture, experimenting with new ways to bring people across the lifespan together and into relationship. We do this with *mutual respect for all*, alert to the tendency for ageism and other biases. We share privilege and power appropriately and generously across the ages in our community. We learn from our mistakes and from each other and continue to grow and deepen our fellowship and lives as a result of our commitment to intergenerational community.

We keep all members and friends safe and uphold our safety covenants. We are all accountable for *healthy boundaries* and behavior and promise to practice and uphold these commitments. We keep each other safe by supporting those who are being discriminated against and having zero tolerance for unsafe behavior. Because our faith is real and relevant,

we understand this behavioral pledge to be a spiritual practice of caring for one another and living in integrity. We believe that how we treat others is how we treat ourselves, as reflected in the 7<sup>th</sup> principle of our faith, our covenant to uphold and protect the *interconnected web of life, of which we are a part*.

#### **4. Welcome people in all their diversity and create belonging for one another.**

Advances the 1st Principle: The inherent worth and dignity of every person.

*The religious way is the deep way, the way that sees what physical eyes alone fail to see, the intangibles of the heart of every phenomenon. The religious way is the way that touches universal relationships; that goes high, wide and deep, that expands the feelings of kinship.*

Sophia Lyon Fahs

The ontological struggle for all humans is to live in the exquisite and sacred balance of *belonging to oneself and belonging to others*, in our case, the congregation. Navigating individuation of self, while maintaining healthy and real connectedness as a part of the whole, is deeply spiritual work. Humans realize this or work toward its end through experience and being in relationship. It pains us to know so many people and groups of people do not have a spiritual or religious home where they can belong and be open about who they truly are. We strive to make ours *a faith where all people can belong*, if they so choose, and be fully and openly who they are. We believe that true belonging creates the conditions which support us in our journey of self-understanding and differentiation. It is a need and inherent right for all people to know they belong, and we open our congregation to all who choose to belong with us.

We understand and respect that *belonging carries with it responsibilities as well as gifts*, namely to extend that belonging to others and to care for each other. The teachings of world religions, religious naturalism, earth-based religions, secularism, humanism, and the lives of great people, are sources of our faith. As such we strive to live into what they teach about our responsibility to *welcome the stranger* into our midst and create a sanctuary for their hearts, minds, and bodies. We honor the divinity and equality of all people and seek to reflect that to one another in all we do. We make our welcoming known as broadly possible in the community and to those who may be seeking a faith community like ours. In so doing we live into the truth that no one need ever be alone.

We welcome diversity, and we change because of the diversity of our members, friends, and guests. We adapt our practices and culture as we learn of our biases and tendencies. We hold ourselves accountable to regular review of our practices, policies, and approaches to all aspects of church life and to changing such things that are oppressive, unwelcoming, or biased. We hold ourselves accountable to lifelong learning about radical welcoming, LBGQTQ+, anti-racism, anti-ageism, anti-ableism. We offer diverse ways for people to experience worship and church life that reflect the myriad ways people experience belonging.

## **5. Support one another in the joys, sorrows, and transitions of our life journeys.**

Advances the 2nd Principle: Justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

*...sometimes, if you ask a stranger what they need, you might just make a friend.*

*Rev. Sunshine Jeremiah Wolfe*

Ours is a relational theology. We thrive on genuine connection to our true selves, other people, the Earth and its creatures, and the holy, experienced by each of us in our own ways. We realize the theological and eschatological vision of a world transformed by love, made manifest by the actions of those living. We orientate toward being responsible for creating “heaven on earth,” or safe havens, for our beloved members and friends.

It is both a privilege and a gift to support those around us, and we attest to the transcendence and presence of mystery that works between us through such care. We promise to show up for one another offering the gifts of our presence, care, and love in times of difficulty, uncertainty, and joy. We nurture and sustain authentic relationships with each other, in order to know one another honestly and free of pretense. These promises and actions prepare the soil of authentic connection, fertilized by acts of care and harvested in times of need.

We celebrate the spiritual truth that as humans, we are all sinners and saints. We all fall short of perfection, which we believe is an unattainable illusion, not meant for humans. We laugh together, cry together, and grow together, encouraging the inherent gifts of every person to flourish. We support the work and well-being of our congregation by joyfully sharing our gifts, talents, and treasures as we are able. In so giving, we strengthen our sense of meaning, our connection to ourselves and the congregation. Joy and play are an important expression of wholehearted living, and nurture renewal in our congregation. So too, learning and growing intellectually are a part of a whole person. We make room and create opportunities for all of that, and more.

We honor the gift of the relationships we create in our congregation through upholding confidentiality, speaking directly to people rather than about them, and keeping our church relationships free of external matters and business. We honor our relationships by keeping them free of profit or business benefit. We delight in creating relationships with many different people, always making space for the newcomers and resisting temptation for exclusivity or fixed circles of care.

**6. Work in partnership, as individuals and as a congregation, to advance justice and put courageous love in service to our community and our world.**

Advances the 6th Principle: The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

*To commit to creating a prophetic congregation today is to grapple with what it means to take responsibility for cocreating the holy right here on earth. Rev. Meg Riley*

We believe in the need for *action and contemplation* in our work for justice. We turn to our spiritual practices, connection with each other, and the transcendent to rekindle our energies and guide our actions. We believe that *faith without works is dead*, and thus we strengthen our faith through acts of service.

The sources from which we draw our religious grounding teach the need for helping our siblings on this earth. Our Universalist heritage teaches that no person is free, or liberated, until all people are liberated. In Buddhism the bodhisattva works to alleviate the suffering of others, delaying their own entrance into nirvana. The Humanist Manifesto III affirms that doing good for society increases the happiness of an individual. The Qur'an teaches in Islam that when you save one person's life, you save humankind. Jews have an obligation to perform tzedakah, or charitable acts. Rooms of recovery assert that an individual's recovery from addiction is predicated on helping others who suffer with the same affliction.

For service work to be true and lasting, it needs to be done *in relationship* with those affected by the injustice. We believe in the power of *collaboration and partnership* and recognize the weakness inherent in solo approaches to working for justice, whether as an individual or as a congregation.

The needs of the world are many, and we realize that we cannot respond to them all. Therefore we focus on issues of justice that are present in our local communities, or to which we have been invited by those with whom we are in relationship; and that best use of the passions of our members align with our Unitarian Universalist principles and do no harm. At the present time this includes being a level II Sanctuary congregation, maintaining membership in organizations working for gun control, supporting the work of local organizations, and partnering in efforts for anti-racism, climate justice, and affordable housing. We regularly review the priorities of our justice work and ensure that we are supporting them with integrity and the support of our individual and collective learning, prophetic witness, ministerial and staff time, along with lay leadership, and budgetary resources.

## 7. Honor our FRS and UU heritage as we journey together.

*Advances the 5th Principle: The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.*

*“What is a course of history, or philosophy, or poetry, no matter how well selected, or the best society, or the most admirable routine of life, compared with the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen?” Henry David Thoreau*

Ours is a history rich in *tradition and legacy*. Unitarians have been torchbearers for the individual’s responsibility to personal conscience, and to a personal search for truth and meaning, unencumbered by dogma or creeds, since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Our Unitarian forebearers insisted upon the integration of reason, intellectual rigor, and faith. Our *Universalist* ancestors saw the light of God in every person. Theirs was a faith that turned away from predestination and a damning hell, dominant in the Protestantism of their day. Universalism appealed to the masses and opened new possibilities for universal salvation and redemption for all.

We honor, respect, and draw upon our Unitarian, Universalist, and Unitarian Universalist ancestors and predecessors. It is our goal to know these people as whole people, whose lives mattered at the time they lived, and continue to matter today.

The pillars of our ancestors’ faith are integrated into our spiritual and religious DNA. Today we move the voices and lives of those who are traditionally on the margins into the center of our circle. We work to protect what our ancestors called the spark of the divine in all people, which we refer to today as the inherent worth and dignity of all people.

Our church has been a *beacon of liberal religion* in Newburyport and the surrounding area for 295 years. Its roots are in congregationalism, Unitarianism, and, then and now, Unitarian Universalism. We honor the history of our congregation and the Unitarian Universalist faith by learning from their success and misgivings. The next five years are a wonderful opportunity to prepare for the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the FRS, through a deep and comprehensive study of the congregation, its people, and the times in which it operated. We use the tercentenary as a time of public celebration and reconciliation. So too is it an opportunity for our congregation, and our members and friends, to deepen their personal and collective faith journeys. This important work creates a bedrock from which we learn, grow, and move.

We believe that the *study of history* is in itself a spiritual practice, when done with an open mind and a commitment to *uphold the victories of the past and set right whatever mistakes we can*. This includes owning our role in racism, sexism, and acts of oppression and omission. By this practice, we hope to attain a degree of *humility* that will put us on equal footing with all people.