



Will Unitarian Universalism remain a living tradition? [Third musing in the series] [1](#), [2](#)

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I was intrigued by excerpts of [Diane Miller's reflections on the proposed changes to the Unitarian Universalist Association \(UUA\) Bylaws](#) to be voted on in June at the General Assembly. Dianne was a young pregnant feminist invited to be on the committee charged with revising our purposes. Her son was born during the committee's work. He was a toddler when what we know as the Seven Principles passed General Assembly in 1985. It was a radical change from such statements in the past. Her son is now a parent with two children, and Diane is retired. She is 74. She is also delighted that the hard work of the committee she served is being revised nearly 40 years later. What struck me most is that, including her generation, which is also mine, three generations of those who became UUs after 1985 have only known the Seven Principles as the definition of who we are.

On the one hand, that's impressive. On the other, it threatens our remaining a proud living tradition. The Commission on Appraisal was established with the 1961 merger of the Unitarians and Universalists. They were tasked with reviewing who we are and giving a report no less than every 15 years. The first report came 21 years later, ultimately giving us the Seven Principles thanks to women angry about noninclusive language and the role of women in the UUA. There was opposition to the changes, but they did eventually pass overwhelmingly.

The problem is that after so long, for many, the Seven Principles are now carved in stone, not sketched in pencil. Chris Rothbauer wrote

The release of this draft has been met with a lot of emotions, ranging from full embrace to full rejection. It shows how important these principles have come to mean to our tradition.

The interesting thing, though, is that, for a tradition that often expresses pride at having no creed, many of the resulting comments have made it clear that, for many in Unitarian Universalism, the seven principles have become a sort of creed,

something that is rigid and cannot be radically changed. The new proposal from the UUA's Article II Commission would eliminate all seven principles in favour of emphasising our shared values.

I've never thought that "because we've always done it that way" is a good excuse to do or not do something, but it's clear that, for many, the seven principles have provided a grounding in their tradition.

Instead, Rothbauer suggests:

What the Article II Commission is telling us is that, after listening to hundreds of Unitarian Universalists from all over the country, what might be the most relevant course of action is to talk more about what values we share in common rather than principles that may or may not be relevant to our current reality. Values are more interpretable. Whereas many believe we need an eighth principle to make our commitment to anti-racism completely transparent, the shared values in the Article II draft make this commitment completely apparent.

He is arguing against those who maintain that the Seven Principles are values when they are statements about truth, that is, facts. In a fact versus values article in Wikipedia, German sociologist Max Weber's 1917 essay *Science as a Vocation* distinguishes between facts and values. He argues that facts can be determined through the methods of a value-free, objective social science, while values are derived through culture and religion, the truth of which cannot be known through science. He writes, "*It is one thing to state facts, to determine mathematical or logical relations or the internal structure of cultural values, while it is another thing to answer questions of the value of culture.*"

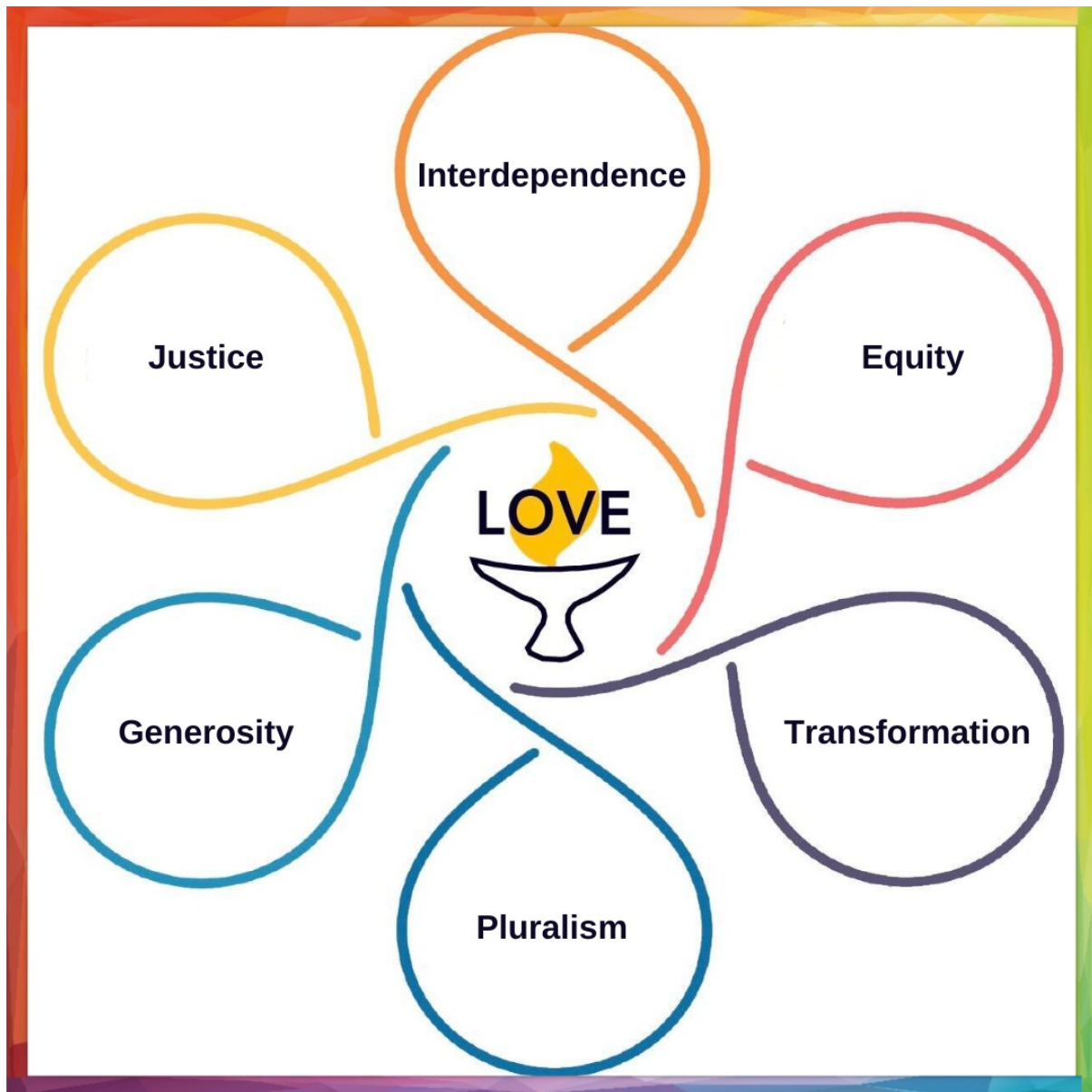
Choosing to focus on our shared values is why the Commission on appraisal has chosen to relegate the Seven Principles to our historical documents.

However, my greatest concern is that, should those who oppose the changes hold sway and defeat the revisions to the bylaws, we could no longer lay claim to being the world's only living religious tradition. UU theologian James Luther Adams has said, "*A living tradition is not bequeathed through some law of inheritance; it must be earned, not without dust and heat, and not without humbling grace.*"

No, the proposed changes are not perfect. Nit-pickers will have a field day, but they do meet the charge given to the committee:

The new Principles and Purposes should guide us in the transformation of ourselves, our communities and our faith into active networks of collective care, restoration, and justice. The Principles and Purposes you will prepare should be a living document that challenges Unitarian Universalists to place the liberation, in all its dimensions, of all, at the centre of our lives. They should be honest about our past, name what we are facing and our aspirations and where we hope to be not for just today but looking out at the horizons. They should ask us to choose Love in Action as the path forward. We have the Universalists to thank for our core value of love.

Instead of the Seven Principles, [Article II Study Report 2021-2023](#) offers this graphic of the proposed values in the revision:



The following describes the image and the UU values we hold:
This image is of a chalice with an overlay of the word love over the flame, with six outstretched arms that create a circle around each of the core values and form a six-petal flower shape. Each arm is a different colour and clockwise, they are Interdependence (Orange), Equity (Red), Transformation (Purple), Pluralism (Dark Blue), Generosity (Teal), and Justice (Yellow). Each represents UU values.

Interdependence honours the interdependent web of all existence.

We covenant to cherish Earth and all beings by creating and nurturing relationships of care and respect. With humility and reverence, we acknowledge our place in the great web of life, and we work to repair harmed and damaged relationships.

Pluralism celebrates 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.

Justice works to create 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.

Transformation adapts 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.

Generosity cultivates 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.

Equity declares 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.

Our Inspirations are not listed, but these statements replace our present six sources:

As Unitarian Universalists, we use and are inspired by sacred and secular understandings that help us to live by our values. We respect the histories, contexts and cultures in which they were created and are currently practised.

These sources ground us and sustain us in ordinary, difficult, and joyous times. Grateful for the religious ancestries we inherit and the diversity

which enriches our faith, we are called to ever deepen and expand our wisdom.

Inclusion

Systems of power, privilege, and oppression have traditionally created barriers for people and groups with particular identities, ages, abilities, and histories. We pledge to replace such barriers with ever-widening circles of solidarity and mutual respect. We strive to be an association of congregations that truly welcome all persons who share our values. We commit to being an association of congregations that empowers and enhances everyone's participation, especially those with historically marginalised identities.

Freedom of belief

Congregational freedom and the individual's right of conscience are central to our Unitarian Universalist heritage.

Congregations may establish statements of purpose, covenants, and bonds of union so long as they do not require that members adhere to a particular creed.

I genuinely hope that the revisions will pass, owning the fact that UUism has evolved, is evolving and will choose to keep evolving. Remaining a living tradition is no small thing. Losing it means losing who we are.

Meditation / Discussion Questions

What values have changed in the world that our Seven Principles do not address?