



Auckland Unitarian Church  
Love beyond belief

## A minister's work is never done, and neither is yours

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I keep getting enquiries about and objections to replacing principles with values (Here are links to the earlier talks on this topic:- [1](#), [2](#), [3](#) & [4](#)). I thought I'd dealt with this issue but, apparently, not satisfactorily for some. So, let me try again.

These changes did not come out of the blue. There are a couple of stories behind them. They tell stories about UU principles and values.

In 2017 Mark Morrison-Reed gave a lecture at First Church Boston entitled "A Black Hole in the White UU Psyche." I have drawn heavily from his work to tell the story.

In 1969, the Unitarian Universalist Association held its General Assembly at the Statler Hilton in Boston, which is now the Park Plaza Hotel. During the 1940s, Egbert Ethelred Brown had been the only man of African descent you would have seen at their annual meeting. But 1969 was completely different. Most delegates had never seen so many black UUs — unless they had been in Cleveland for the General Assembly the year before. This black presence left many white UUs perplexed. Some even asked, "Where did they all come from?"

African Americans served as heads of the governing board of predominantly white UU congregations during the 1940s, '50s, and early '60s. In 1956 a survey reported that 80 Unitarian congregations had African American members, and in 49 of those congregations, African Americans were active as officers. That means sixty years ago, nearly 10 per cent of Unitarian congregations had African American members holding leadership positions.

This has not been common knowledge, be it 1969 or now.

What is the consequence of not knowing? We see the lack of black leaders confirming the belief that Unitarian Universalism does not appeal to African Americans. Why don't we know this history? Why would we, when in the context of Unitarian Universalism and across the entire American milieu, black lives don't matter?

African Americans were invisible in our scholarship. Their absence reflected the belief — and contributed to the view — that there was no story to tell. Yet African Americans had been founding members of Universalist, Unitarian, and UU congregations as early as 1785 when Gloster Dalton was a signatory at the founding of John Murray's Universalist congregation. There were other UU congregations that black folks founded or at least tried to found. In 1860, a Baptist minister, William Jackson, testified at the Autumnal Convention of the American Unitarian Association (AUA) to his conversion to Unitarianism. "They took a collection and sent him on his way," historian Douglas Stange writes. "No discussion, no welcome, no expression of praise and satisfaction was uttered, that the Unitarian gospel had reached the 'coloured.'"

African Americans were nearly invisible in both worship and religious education as well.

Consequently, we have embraced a false narrative about who we are.

The fact is this: John van Schaick, who controlled Universalism's journal, the *Christian Leader*, for twenty-two years, was an out-and-out racist. When he became editor of the *Leader*, articles about the Universalist "Mission to the Coloured People" disappeared from the front page, and he said white Unitarian ministers were betraying their race and "should go elsewhere" if they wished to be a minister.

Are you confused? This faith you love has said repeatedly, sometimes in word but more often in deed: black lives don't matter.

In America, at least, liberal religion was wedded to Anglo-Saxon culture. There was no doubt in William Ellery Channing's mind or Theodore Parker's mind of their own superiority. They believed, as did Sam Eliot and Louis Cornish after them, that the New England (which is to say, Yankee) Unitarian frame of mind was something to be promulgated across America. From this racist point of view, blacks ranked below the Irish and the Slavs.

The behaviour of both Unitarians and Universalists was imbued with prejudice, and their racism was systemic. This is a harsh judgment, but better than perpetuating the assumption that Unitarians and Universalists were enlightened when they were not. Principles did not spare us from racist values. [Adapted from Mark Morrison-Reed's 2017 Minns Lecture,

*delivered 31 March 2017, at First Church in Boston. Watch the 2017 lectures, "Historical and Future Trajectories of Black Lives Matter and Unitarian Universalism," by Morrison-Reed and the Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt, president of Starr King School for the Ministry]*

The chickens all came home to roost in 1969. In 1967 while cities burned in riots, the Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus (BUUC) was formed. They searched for an identity more authentic than the futile attempt to be carbon copies of white people. They saw white liberalism's emphasis on integration as a one-way street that elevated white and debased black. Civil rights had changed the law but had proven ineffective at remedying black poverty; liberal religion had failed to address the experience of blackness or to settle an African American in a major pulpit. The group called for a new agenda, and by the time they emerged, the BUUC Steering Committee had been formed. They insisted that their demand be voted up or down at the General Assembly without debate, including a resolution that \$1 million (12 per cent of the UUA budget) be directed toward the black community for four years.

Although the all-or-nothing tactic worked with the socially committed Euro-Americans at the conference, it was doomed to fail over the long haul — because, ultimately, UUs are wedded to individualism and reflexively distrust and resist authority, whatever the cause.

The conference sent shock waves through the UUA, leading to a walkout by Black UUs and their white allies. Principles versus values nearly created a schism. Ben Scott, who was there and later became BAC's treasurer, recalled, "It was also traumatic. I am not the only UU who was irreversibly shaped by it. Thousands were born again. They came to a better understanding of the whole world through the BAC. They came to a thrilling sense of the awesome potential of human society. In our little UU corner of the world, lifelong friendships crumbled, marriages dissolved, careers were ended . . . and congregations split into factions." Scott's words only hint at the intensity of the feelings. For many, what happened during the ensuing years would be nothing less than life-defining.

A paradigm shift away from integration and toward black self-determination was taking place, a change for which the UUA was ill-prepared. Some depict this as a failure of vision. The paralysis, however, is understandable. How does one decide whether to support black demands for empowerment and justice or to respect the democratic process with its vagaries and delays?

While the BUUC won the vote, budget constraints prevented the UUA Board from fulfilling the demands. The BUUC disaffiliated from the UUA. Black UUs left their congregations in droves.

The UUA stumbled and had to, but the event also set the scene for women, lesbian and gay people, the disabled, Hispanics, and other marginalised groups in the UUA to speak out, claim their space, and make demands. These identity groups also experienced resistance, but the outcry was neither as prolonged nor intense. Who today would challenge an oppressed group's right to gather together to explore its identity, formulate a strategy, and take a stance? Never again since 1969 has the UUA Board of Trustees, Nominating Committee, or Commission on Appraisal been without significant African-American representation. Never again would we produce hymnal or religious education materials without reference to the African-American experience. The events set in motion by the black rebellion traumatised but also transformed some and educated us all. As Ben Scott said, "The tragedy would have been if successive generations had had to continue to struggle the way they did." [Adapted with permission from "The Empowerment Saga" by Mark D. Morrison-Reed, in *Darkening the Doorways: Black Trailblazers and Missed Opportunities in Unitarian Universalism*, ed. by Mark D. Morrison-Reed (Skinner House Books, 2011).]

A related story of principles and values being in conflict happened near the end of Peter Morales' term as UUA President. When elected in 2009, he was the first Latino and second person of colour to hold that office. During Morales's presidency, the UUA embraced immigration reform and immigrant rights as key priorities and promoted Black Lives Matter. Morales launched a comprehensive review of UU ministry early in his presidency as part of a push to make Unitarian Universalism "a multicultural faith" and pointed with pride to the growing number of ministers and seminarians preparing for UU ministry who are people of colour.

However, he was frustrated that hiring practices advantaged white candidates over people of colour, perpetuating white supremacy. He resigned as president three months before his term ended. When he left office, he called on the UUA to take very seriously the question of how our policies, practices, leadership and culture systematically centre and advantage white people within Unitarian Universalism. We acknowledge that it is time for us to examine more deeply than we ever have the patterns of institutional racism embedded in our leadership practices, including hiring.

These stories were the beginning of taking our values as seriously as our principles, which would lead to the proposed changes in our bylaws.

So, what is the difference between principles and values, and how are they related?

The stories tell us two things. We have not always lived up to our principles.

Principles help guide our behaviour, but only if our values align.

What you should know about principles:

- They don't change with the times.
- They don't depend on the values you hold dear.
- They're independent of religions and personal belief systems.
- They're not up for debate.

While plenty of religions take credit for the existence of principles, it's more accurate to say principles, in concert with personal values, guided the creation of religions and other beliefs.

Put simply; your values are your "Why" — the reasons why you do what you do and think what you think. Values are part of your internal guidance system.

According to science, values are mental processes involving cognition and emotion — thinking and feeling.

That said, to be effective, values must be actionable. If your actions suggest otherwise, it's not enough to say your values are honesty, courage, and tenacity.

What else should you know about values?

- They're personal and subjective.
- They can change with time.
- Their merit depends on their alignment with principles.

Your habits and actions speak more about your values than your words do.

What are the critical differences between principles and values?

1. Values govern your behaviour; principles govern the consequences.

Your values drive your behaviour and determine your chosen habits. Deeply-held values are more likely to influence you than those you admire but haven't internalized.

On the other hand, principles have more to do with the consequences of your actions — from condemnation or praise to punishments and rewards.

The more your values and resulting behaviour diverge from universal principles, the more likely you'll be judged and punished for them.

2. Values are the maps; principles are the territory.

Values help you navigate the terrain in which you live, work, and learn. Principles are inherent to the terrain — your entire world and many laws governing it.

Whatever you bring to that world, principles are already there. You have no role in their creation or maintenance. And if your values do not agree with those principles, your maps and navigation systems will fail you.

3. Values are subjective and emotional; principles are objective and factual.

Your values depend on your choices, personal preferences, and what you've learned from others.

Principles are independent of subjective experience and preferences. Based on facts or universal realities, they're objective and irrefutable.

Whatever you believe and however you behave, principles just *are*.

4. Values are personal; principles are universal.

Your values are your own. Once you identify the values you hold most dear, they're intensely personal. They're who you are or want to be — or both.

Principles are universal and don't rely on individual choices, beliefs, or moral codes. They're more likely to influence all three. The more personal values in a community align with those universal principles, the more cohesive and supportive that community is likely to be.

5. Values are internal; principles are external.

Values are formed and maintained inwardly — as part of your internal guidance system. Your set of values exists only within you. Another person may share some of the same values, but their unique set and inherent prioritisation will likely differ from yours. Principles are external to you and individuals in general. They exist outside of your mind and heart. And your will does not affect them.

6. Values are chosen or adopted; principles are not.

You choose your values. Or you adopt them from someone who's influenced you. And you can, over time, decide to abandon some values in favour of different ones.

Principles aren't chosen. They exist independent of your will and understanding. You can choose values that align with them but can't select the principles themselves.

But you can choose to live by them. That's what values are for.

7. Values can be destructive; principles cannot.

Values aren't based on an inherent sense of right and wrong. Your values govern your actions — even when those actions do more harm than good.

Values that don't align with universal principles — like justice, equality, and altruism (i.e., concern for the welfare of others) — are toxic and destructive.

Principles, on the other hand, cannot be destructive. It's a diversion from or defiance of those principles that causes most of (if not all) the problems we face.

The purpose of the changes to our bylaws is to align our values with our principles. The stories I shared explain the necessity of doing so if we

are to be true to who we are. Principles without values leave us without guidance. Values without principles fail to empower us to act.

**Meditation / Discussion Question:-**

When have your values not aligned with your principles?

And what were the consequences?