

Memory and Meaning: Sustaining Our Legacy

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

September 20, 2015

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A little over a generation ago, Unitarian Universalists in North America, through a thoughtful, deliberative process, identified what they believed to be the key Principles and Sources of our Religious Faith. Seven principles, six sources. The Principles say what we truly, deeply believe and value, and they identify the ways and means by which we hope to make them real in this world. The Sources identify where we go for trustworthy authorities in order to justify our values and worldview, our spiritual practices and moral and ethical commitments. Though it's quite a challenge to distill the Principles and Sources into a sound bite, an elevator speech, I like them, I really do and believe they're standing up quite well a generation later and will serve us well for some time to come.

Let me put it this way, and with greater emphasis: I agree with the core values, those Seven Principles, to such a degree that I made a promise, a covenant, to affirm and promote them; anyone who becomes a member of Unitarian congregations makes a similar promise. And that makes us a covenant people. Interesting.

As well, I positively glory in the sheer range and depth of the Sources we draw from to inspire, inform, challenge and justify our values, our faith, and world view to ourselves and to others. We're incredibly fortunate to have such a sweeping breadth of Sources to turn to. They can help save us from dogmatism. They should enable us to welcome a wide range of extraordinary experiences and people into our religious community. I believe that just about anyone of good will can turn to these Sources and find the kind of support and inspiration we

need to better understand *and* to stand up for what we deeply value and hope for in this one and precious world of ours.

I hope you can see that what I have said about our Principles and Sources is true praise indeed, because now I want us to look at them from a different angle, discover what may be missing, and then somehow tie all this into the final stage of our capital campaign that we have launched this weekend, and the challenge, the gift of sustaining this congregation's legacy at 49th and Oak. (Are you ready?)

Scanning down our Seven Principles, we find an assertion about the integrity of the *individual* and a call to see and respect *all things* as interconnected and dependent on each other as part deep mystery and splendour of *existence itself*. There are lists of *virtues, ideals and emotions* that we prize, affirm and aspire to embody. There are descriptions of how we intend to *relate* to one another personally and communally, and the means and *procedures* we will employ—believing them to be best suited to express and enrich those ideals, virtues, affects, and relations.

Turning to our Six Sources, (these are the authorities, the sites, we draw from trusting that each and all contribute to enriching and justifying our faith, our world view and our principled commitments and practices) we find the powerful authority of our *personal, spiritual encounters* with the very source and ground of being and the existence of all things. We turn to the *words and deeds* of historical persons and their inspiring examples of righteousness and integrity. We draw from the *wisdom* of the religions of the world, the *teachings* of our Judaic and Christian roots, the guidance of *reason* and science, and *teachings* of Earth-centred traditions.

It's inspiring, encouraging, and challenging—a whole world in there of ideals, virtues, emotions, and procedures for relating, as well as powerful, authoritative sources to draw from to keep our religion alive, vital and compelling.

But there's something missing, something taken for granted in all this (do you know what it is, can you guess?)—and that is *place*. *The physical places* where we think, feel, read and relate, where we meet, eat, sing and learn; where we care for one another, deliberate together, and encourage one another; the places where we gather to grieve, celebrate, explore and worship.

Reading down through the Principles and Sources, (which is a kind of composite portrait of us Unitarians), it's as though there's just these individuals out there in the web of existence, or in flow with the rhythms of nature, trying to live a set of values and virtues, trying to connect, picking up insight, wisdom and teachings from experience, reason, books, exemplary people from the past, other religions and Nature herself. There is a nod to something called congregations, society at large and world community; but again, my question is: where does all of this happen? And more specifically, where does this thing we call Unitarian take place?

The concrete physicality, the material and spatial situation—the site, the place—root and branch, foundation to roof beam, wall to wall, floor to ceiling—the sacred places we have created, built and sustained in order to situate and gather us together so that the Principles and Sources and the people who strive to live and embody them may have a common home—that's what's missing, or perhaps just assumed, taken for granted. It's something we shouldn't, we can't take for granted. Ask anyone who's been homeless or scrambling for shelter. Anyone who's lived in a tent in a park with a young wife and two little kids, as I have, knows that *place matters*. A roof and walls, a floor, heat, lighting and running water—no healthy life of the body,

no work place, domestic sphere, no life of the spirit, no congregation, society or world community can thrive and endure without them.

I can imagine adding an “Eighth Principle” that would read something like:

we will build and care for safe, accessible and welcoming places of meeting... for worship, learning, and mutual support and for celebrating our lives and these Unitarian values we hold dear.

I can imagine adding a “Seventh Source” that would read something like:

our living tradition also draws from sacred places—sites in nature that fill us with awe and reverence, as well as ordinary buildings and grounds made extraordinary, made sacred by shared memory, story, ritual and community.

Don’t hold your breath, you won’t see these added any time soon; but if they were, we would foreground and give due acknowledgment to something essential that’s missing from that basic statement of the principles and sources of our religious faith.

I’m astonished by how deep the grooves of memory are laid down in our early years; how vividly experiences and places stand out in our minds and emotions so many years later. How readily accessible they are while so many others recede in the rolling fog of time.

I was a church going lad; every Sunday. And in my mind’s eye, looking back, down through time, I can see those two buildings where I went to church as a child and teenagers more clearly etched and standing forth than what I did and where I was yesterday. I can see every

room and hallway, the kitchens and washrooms, the chapels, and the light streaming through the windows in those two buildings on Highland Drive and 13th East in Salt Lake City, Utah.

I will confess, and this is the interesting thing, that I don't remember what was said there: the sermons, the scriptures read aloud. But I *do* remember the sight of generations gathered together in the chapel; and from neighbours, my young friends, old folk and families—an awesome feeling that we shared something in common that ran much deeper and that was more important than what went on normally throughout the week. I also felt safe there and valued, respected, *loved* by people who weren't even family; people who cared for me and wished me well on my journey. A people gathered together in a place, a building, each making the other sacred, set apart from the everyday world. And it was there, in that place and with those people that I must have learned down deep that my life had meaning—some real and treasured purpose beyond price. That's the power of a people gathered by shared values in an ordinary building made extraordinary, made sacred by *memory, story, ritual and community*.

Now a person can be driven away from a religious home, or exile herself and become a spiritual refugee, true enough; but if a person is fortunate, as I have been, he can find another people to claim as his own and be welcomed by them; a people gathered by shared values in another building made sacred by the people who envisioned, created and sustained it by generous giving of themselves and their means. A person like me—or you—or those who one day will walk through those doors and find a haven and a home in this world and so, carry on a life of meaning—a life that makes sense and that has an enduring purpose.

I hope you can see from this just how extraordinary are these buildings, this time, this place and what we're doing here—how extraordinary and important all of this is. I hope you can

feel it. Especially, (and I'm speaking to the adults in the room) I hope you can understand how important our role is in helping our children and youth feel and really know they are valued, respected and cared for by us, and that we wish them well on their journey in word and deed. We're making indelible memories for them, as well as us, and a house within these walls, on these grounds and by what we do here—all with the intent for the creation of meaning and purpose in their lives, as well as our own. May that truly be our legacy.