

Minilogue

Like me, the seven principles and six sources of Unitarian Universalism have been officially ‘retired’ for a couple of years, but just as I remain active in ministry despite my official retirement, so too, the language of the covenant that held our denomination together for the last forty years can still sometimes serve to provoke thought and inspire faith and action. My ministerial career has been basically coextensive with the career of the principles and sources, so they are deeply engraved in my psyche, and I still tend to conduct my ministry within their “theological” framework.

The fourth principle, for example, affirms the value of “*a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.*” Both adjectives in that fine phrase are important; freedom and responsibility belong together in a kind of creative tension.

One of the things that I have always valued about our religious tradition is the permission and active encouragement that it gives each individual to explore freely among the many sources of spiritual wisdom and inspiration. Each person is truly free to search for those teachings that resonate most deeply within and that provide them with both challenge and support. Needless to say, this kind of spiritual freedom is not always granted by religious authorities, who may restrict in advance the permissible areas where truth and meaning are to be sought – solely in *this* sacred text, or *that* holy teacher, or using only *our* authorized method, for example. I doubt that I would have lasted very long in any religious community that declared certain theological ideas “off limits” in principle. I also understand that for many people, the sheer number and variety of possible spiritual pathways may make the whole idea of a spiritual search seem overwhelming. As one former parishioner put it, “you say that the church will support me on my spiritual path, but how do I even find a path to begin with?” An important part of spiritual leadership is to serve as a guide and companion for those trying to find their way in what can sometimes seem like a trackless wilderness. I find this aspect of ministry to be deeply satisfying, and I’m always grateful when people ask for support as they exercise their spiritual freedom.

This fundamental spiritual liberty at the heart of our faith does not mean that Unitarian Universalists can, as the expression goes, “believe anything they want.”

If you really want to raise my blood pressure, try telling me that! I once heard a young person share that understanding of his church's teaching during his "coming of age" ceremony — our equivalent of confirmation — and I thought to myself that his congregation had utterly failed him in some essential way. That definition of our tradition is -- in a word -- irresponsible. It is a half-truth at best. It fails to recognize the second adjective of our fourth principle – that our free search is carried out in a *responsible* way, which means that we are called to respond to and be in real relationship with others in our religious community, others who will have insights, discoveries, and questions of their own. As we share our discoveries, our insights, our conclusions — our "revelations," if you will – with these others, we will be challenged and our sense of truth and meaning will have to expand and deepen. Together, we construct truth and meaning as an ever-evolving process.

If we fail to exercise our full spiritual freedom, our vision of truth and meaning will become narrow, rigid, and stale. On the other hand, if we fail to exercise our responsibility, the result will be an assortment of individual visions that are fragmented, idiosyncratic, disconnected and ungrounded in a shared reality. *Together*, freedom and responsibility can combine to create a powerful shared vision of spiritual community.

In free and responsible fellowship,

Rev. Bruce