

A Quarter Century of Grace and Gratitude

a Sermon by Dale Kemmerer

delivered at All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church on July 17, 2016

On a July Sunday morning, 25 years ago, similar to this morning, Liz and I accepted an invitation from Lee Milner to attend this Church — All Souls Unitarian Universalist.

We came with a little apprehension. Liz and I had both been raised Christian — Liz, Catholic; me, Lutheran. But for the greater part of our adult lives we were unchurched.

Harvey Joiner, the minister, was on vacation. Attendance was small and the program slim. Services were haphazard, but there were friendly people like Dick and Barbara [Kohlhaas] and always coffee hour.

However, much more appealing to us: this space like no other church. No cross, no altar, no organ — only a restful space beautiful light and friendly people.

Most appealing were the Seven Principles and Six Sources of Our Tradition printed on the order of service.

The Seven Principles on the order of service were:

- 1st Principle: The inherent worth and dignity of every person.
- 2nd Principle: Justice, equity and compassion in human relations.
- 3rd Principle: Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.
- 4th Principle: A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.
- 5th Principle: The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large. (More on this later in the Talkback.)
- 6th Principle: The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.
- 7th Principle: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. (That was new!)

The Six Sources on the order of service were:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life. (More of this later.)
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power.
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life.
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.
- Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered religions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature. (That certainly was new.)

Wow, that was new and different!

So we returned regularly — we talked with Harvey Joiner on his return — and by mid-November we decided to join this loving community. We signed the book. And this is my experience: 25 years of grace and gratitude. This is my witness.

Now, I also believe that this HOUR should be a dialog; I believe you should be able to voice your ideas about what is said and sung here. So, after the service and you have a cup of coffee, please return here to tell me your experience. We'll have a talkback. That's the democratic process in our 5th Principle.

Not long after signing the book, Harvey asked me to lead a forum which was a new idea. For the chosen topic, sometimes a guest speaker came (charity or civic leader, Focus on the Family – twice). Our circle grew to 15 or 20, each having a turn to speak. But mostly we learned to listen to others and to understand.

I am a doctor. You may know that frequently the doctor-patient relationship goes something like this ... “Good morning, Mrs. Smith. How are you?” And within seconds — 18 or 20 (it's been measured) but almost never 40 or more — the doctor interrupts with his questions.

Thankfully, I learned to listen — a difficult lesson, one I am still learning, and for this I am grateful.

Liz and I became active on the Fellowship Team, a team promoting getting to know fellow UUs through:

- Monthly circle suppers
- Coffee and cookies after service
- All Souls Soles, a Wednesday morning hiking group
- The All Souls Heretics, a softball team in the church league, that won a few games with Alma [Cremonesi] and Rick [Schwarz] and others

At that time, the religious right had co-opted many good spiritual words. Many of us did not know how to use them or feared using them, that we might be misunderstood (or worse). Good English words like “redemption,” “repentance,” “forgiveness,” “grace,” “sin,” and the “G” word.

However, Harvey did have many great sermons about Jesus and Bible Stories with amazing UU interpretations. Also, our UUA national president (Rev. Bill Sinkford) challenged us to develop and reclaim a language of reverence (and spirituality).

My response was to lead a service here and at four or five other UU fellowships. The service went as follows ...

First, I spoke about GRACE for a few minutes. Grace — the understanding of which is available to everyone — a bedrock Universalist teaching. And then we sang Amazing Grace — the words of a 19th century slave ship captain. The music speaks a truth available to all.

Then I spoke about Jesus as a healer and human, and then we sang #276 from our hymnal: “O young and fearless prophet — your life is still a summons to serve humanity.” How true that is.

And then I said the “G” word. For we know God is not God’s name. It is my name for the transcendent awe, the mystery, the wonder and beauty and power that lies beyond description — but not beyond experience.

So then we sang hymn #273: “Immortal, invisible God only wise” — a hymn with 19th century language — using 18 or 20 descriptive words for the deity, and which explains in the final chords, “It is only the splendor of light hideth thee” — a great metaphor for God.

Rev. Sinkford also challenged us to design an elevator speech. As you and a friend board an elevator and she says to you, “What is this UU business?”

Could you give a clear, inviting response before you reached the street floor?

So we developed it without fear to speak words of reverence and spirituality. I continue to revise my elevator speech often.

Covenant groups are fellowships of UUs in an agreement of confidentiality to share their hopes, doubts and lives and faith. What is said in the group stays in the group — sort of like Las Vegas. For many years, we met twice monthly on Wednesday nights, here on this stage; and when Ginny Ludwig’s chronic lung disease grew worse, and she entered hospice at home, we were confident and joyful to meet at her home regularly until she died months later.

Joy [Oliver], Phyllis [Dunn], and Deborah [Hunter] remain my friends today. For this Experiential Fellowship, I am very grateful.

I am a scientist, a practicing physician. I read a lot of medicine, history, religion, psychology. So several years ago, on two Sunday mornings, I gave my answers to a troubling question: why is religion ubiquitous — 10,000 of them present in all human cultures — as our First Source of Tradition states?

Possible answers: it’s political; it’s the divine right of kings; it’s the OPIATE of the Masses if you are a Marxist.

However, I believe it’s in our DNA. One brief example is Altruism. E. O. Wilson and David Sloan Wilson formulate it this way: selfishness beats altruism within groups. Altruistic groups beat selfish groups. It’s heredity.

The research goes on in this field of evolutionary psychology. It explains much of what makes us human and religious. And since I believe this to be so ... UUs are well-placed (maybe uniquely placed) to respond to a secular society with religion in our roots.

I have told the story many times about 1995 in Alamosa, Colorado when I was shot by a 14-year-old Hispanic boy named Jeremy in an attempted holdup. Later, Jeremy spoke words of sorrow and contrition, and I spoke words of forgiveness and gratitude; and we were both healed. Many others healed also, and we went on with the rest of our lives.

Acknowledging our errors AND granting forgiveness is one of the greatest human experiences, possibly the most powerful experience. I have always said that if my life were a film or a movie, I would never edit out these events; and, likewise, I would not have a rerun of it. Forgiveness benefits all – but it benefits the forgiver most of all.

From our youth program and children, I have learned to say Namaste and place my hands together and look you in the eye ... saying and thinking the divine in me recognizes the divine in you. A great spiritual practice, it is relatively easy to say to you this morning. It is more difficult with those whom we disagree with or dislike – but it is still important.

And I am awed, I am humbled, when those Christians in Charleston, South Carolina are able to see the killer of their pastor and friends and speak words of forgiveness.

Something else I love to hear: when our leader this morning or Nori says that this hour together is brought here by you, for you, and that is what makes this sacred space. And so, during the offertory, we will hear Heidi Cooper singing and telling us that Everything Is Holy Now. Thank you, Heidi.

I have related this morning much of what I have experienced in 25 years: our principles and the sources of our tradition; learning to listen and say “Namaste;” fellowship in this community, especially covenant groups; living and speaking spirituality; the power of forgiveness.

One thing I have not done is give advice, for unsought advice is useless and often destructive. That is why I choose reading #715 by Khalil Gibran:

Your children are not your children
you may give them your love but not your thoughts
for they have their own thoughts
and live in the house of tomorrow
which you cannot visit, even in your dreams.

This is something I am still learning the hard way.

There is a UU theologian who uses the word Finitude – the finiteness of one’s self. I want to tell you now how once more I experienced my finitude and how it changed my life.

Two years ago, August, I was with my friends Tom and Jan in their cabins in the Bonaparte Plateau, a Provincial Park in British Columbia. It is a vast wilderness of dozens of square miles with 20 or 30 lakes, isolated with only moose, wolves, and loons. To get there, you must hike several miles for the trailhead.

During that time we celebrated my 81st birthday by hiking across the Plateau, climbing a rock cone, and viewing the many lakes and forests. Solitude. Solitude. Solitude like I had never before experienced.

The next day, I woke up in my cabin and thought, "Ahh, this what it feels like to be 81 plus 1." The next day: "Ahh, 81 plus 2."

I am a reasonably proficient canoeist and sailor, so what I am about to relate is embarrassing. When I went fishing that day, I caught my line on a lily pad in 20 feet of water, in the middle of the lake. I backpaddled, I leaned out to retrieve it ... and then the canoe became unstable.

Suddenly I was lying on my back – fully clothed, my glasses still on, my canoe drifting away with the wind – looking up at a beautiful blue sky and saying, "81 plus 2 – this is how it's going to end: I'm going to die here."

I quickly swam backstroke, caught my canoe, stopped yelling ... and my panic stopped. My friends, who were half a mile away at the time, came and rescued me.

It is amazing how suddenly realizing my Finitude (again) drove me to action ... and that night I began to change a troubled relationship that was full of both joy and great pain. Two years have now passed, and this may be the best two years of my life; and for that, I am grateful.

Now, I have talked for less than 20 minutes. I have told you some of my experiences during the past 25 years. After our closing hymn, "Blue Boat Home," and we complete the ritual of extinguishing our flame – which is very solemn for me – and Sharon plays the postlude, and we greet one another over coffee, I invite you back here to speak what is on your mind in a Talk Back.

For this blue boat home of earth, and for community and this sacred space – All Souls – and to you, my friends, I say, "Thank You and Amen."