

November 11, 2007 — "The Eighth Principle"
Rev. Dan Harper — First Unitarian in New Bedford

The sermon as actually preached contained extemporaneous additions, and varied in other ways from the text below. Sermon copyright © 2007 Dan Harper. All rights reserved.

Readings — I chose the readings this morning because I wanted you to hear the voices of non-white people who are Unitarian Universalists. And I'll be reading publicly-available writings by two people I happen to know, Kon Heong McNaughton, and Alicia Roxanne Ford.

The first reading is by Alicia Roxanne Ford, poet, Unitarian Universalist minister, who also happens to be a black woman born on the Caribbean island of Tobago.

"At thirteen I sat on the beach watching the sun set. Do you know that moment... the moment when the sun first meets the horizon? The kiss lightly "hello" — then the embrace begins? That moment when sun and sea seem to melt seamlessly into one effortless creation...new every evening and at the same time birthing dusk — if you are observant, careful — you will see the moon and maybe, just maybe a brave star. Depending on your angle, it will seem as though the coconut trees are offering a blessing – and the waves are humming a prayer. At thirteen — just for one evening, one private moment, I had the right angle and there was an instant in all of this that I could not tell where I began/ended — it was not the sun, but I who melted seamlessly...and it was I who nodded my lean body offering a blessing...my tears were waves praying for World. In that one moment, god was everywhere in all things and beyond all; transcendent and immanent – in that one moment, I heard the sea calling.... Calling. And without knowing why, I gave myself.

"...At the cornerstone of that calling and my own theological outlook is "respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part" as well as a deep appreciation for the "direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder...which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life." Coming to this ecclesial body has been a blessing... in many ways, it had to be this one "free church movement" and no other. While the UU movement remains a work in progress, what is significant at this time for me is that we remain so — willing to engage and live into what it means to be wholly alive, struggling with race/class/gender/sexism/religious pluralism/political conflict and so on — all of which shapes us as we seek to shape and influence them. As challenging as it often is, what draws me and keeps me here is the opportunity to wrestle in community — as well as opportunities to live out my authentic theological praxis.

[Ellipses are Alicia's. From http://uusankofa.org/tiki-read_article.php?articleId=9 — accessed 25 October 2007.]

The second reading is from "Why I am a U[nitarian] U[niversalist]: An Asian Immigrant Perspective," by Kok Heong McNaughton. If Kok Heong were here, she would likely tell you that she is the world's most embarrassing grandma, and then show you pictures of her grandchildren. Since I know she'd tell you that, I figured I'd better tell you that. she writes:

"I am an ethnic Chinese born and raised in Malaysia....

"I first heard the word "Unitarian" in 1976 from a Taiji student of mine who was a member of the Unitarian Church of Los Alamos. This was back when transcendental meditation was the "in" thing. I was comparing Taiji as a meditation in movement with transcendental meditation and this student said to me, "Oh yes, we meditate in our church." This intrigued me.

What kind of church does meditation? She said, "Unitarian Church." I said, "Never heard of it." I looked in my Chinese-English dictionary and I couldn't find a translation of the word.

"Talk about miracle! I heard the word for the second time that week when I met a young woman at the Newcomer's playgroup who also attended the Unitarian Church. When I indicated an interest, instead of giving me an earful, she simply called up the church office and put me on their newsletter mailing list. Through reading the newsletter, I followed the activities of this church for several months before attending my first service.

"This was a service about Amnesty International. It blew my mind. Back home in Malaysia, I grew up without political freedom. As students, we were told to avoid any involvement in politics. Our job was to study. Leave politics to the politicians. Accept the status quo. Don't rock the boat. You'll be OK. Try to make trouble? You'll mysteriously disappear and rot in a jail somewhere. Here I was flabbergasted because here's a group of people whose passion was to free political prisoners in third world countries! I never knew about Amnesty International. I suddenly felt this connection of humankind for one another, that there are people here in the free world who care enough to fight against injustices in the world. I never knew of a church that would take a stand on human rights issues. I had thought that all one does in a church was to sing hymns, praise the Lord, pray for one another's salvation, and put money in the collection basket.

"After that first service, I returned again and again. The more I found out about Unitarian Universalism, the more it fitted. I particularly appreciated the use of science and reason to explore and to determine for oneself what is the truth, what are myths, what to accept and what to reject in building one's own unique theology. I didn't have to take everything on blind, unquestioning faith. Another aspect of Unitarian Universalism that makes me feel special as an Asian American is the emphasis on cultural, ethnic and religious diversity. I didn't have to check a part of me at the door and to pretend to be who I wasn't. My ethnic differences were not only accepted, but they were affirmed and upheld. People were interested in what I had to share: I teach Taiji and Qigong, I taught Chinese cooking classes, I bring ethnic foods to our potlucks, I even share my language with those who were interested. I am often consulted about Taoist and Buddhist practices and readings, and asked if I thought the translations were accurate. My opinion mattered. This not only gives me pride in my culture, but it also encourages me to dig deeper into my own heritage, to find out more in areas where my knowledge and expertise are lacking. It helps me to look at my heritage with fresh eyes."

[From <http://www.apuu.org/WhyUU.html> — accessed November 8, 2007]

Sermon — "The Eighth Principle"

Each fall, I try to devote at least one sermon to the so-called "seven principles." For those of you who have never heard of the "seven principles," they come from article 2.1 of the Bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association. We are a member congregation of the Unitarian Universalist Association, and as such we have agreed to affirm and promote these seven principles. And for those of you who may not yet be familiar with them, here are the seven principles:

We affirm and promote: "The inherent worth and dignity of every person; justice, equity and compassion in human relations; acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations; a free and responsible search for truth and meaning; the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at

large; the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all; respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part."

Mind you, these seven principles are not a creed, nor are they a statement of religious belief. As Unitarian Universalists, we're not particularly concerned with what you believe; but we do care about what people do with their lives. As I read them, these seven principles are a call to action. As we live our lives, we aim to treat others as we would like to be treated ourselves; to promote justice, equity, and compassion; to accept each other and encourage one another in spiritual growth; to always engage in a search for truth and meaning; to affirm and promote democratic process; to work towards the goal of world community; and to respect our planet earth.

We often talk about these seven principles, but it seems to me that there's at least one more principle, an eighth principle if you will, that we need to talk about. If you read a little further in Article 2 of bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association, you will come to section 2.3, which reads as follows:

"The Association declares and affirms its special responsibility, and that of its member congregations and organizations, to promote the full participation of persons in all of its and their activities and in the full range of human endeavor without regard to race, ethnicity, gender, disability, affectional or sexual orientation, age, language, citizenship status, economic status, or national origin and without requiring adherence to any particular interpretation of religion or to any particular religious belief or creed."

This is what I call the eighth principle. Each week, we read a slightly modified version of this eighth principle at the very beginning of our worship services. It lies at the very core of who we are as a congregation here in First Unitarian in New Bedford. Although it is related to the other seven principles, this eighth principle goes beyond those other seven because it tells us that we have a "special responsibility" to live out the ideals of justice and equality for all persons in our congregations and in the wider world. This morning, I'd like to focus on one way in which we Unitarian Universalists have tried to live out this "eighth principle" of ours. And to do that, let's go back in time....

A few forward-looking Unitarians and Universalists have always been at the forefront of racial justice. Our own John Murray Spear, the first minister of First Universalist church, one of our antecedent churches, helped form an interracial congregation here in New Bedford in the 1830's. Unfortunately, we had our share of segregationists, too, and an even bigger number of people who didn't care one way or the other. But by the 1950's, there was a growing awareness among Unitarians and Universalists that racial equity and racial justice lies at the heart of our religious tradition.

I'll give you one minor example of how that growing awareness played out in the 1950's. My mother, who was not a particularly unusual Unitarian, was a schoolteacher, and in the early 1950's she got a job working in the Wilmington, Delaware, school system, teaching in an integrated school. She told us how one day she was walking down the street holding the hands of two kindergarteners, when a man drove by and shouted a racial epithet at her — both of those children happened to be African American children, and that man shouted "nigger lover" at her, a truly offensive thing to say where those children could hear it. I'm sure that man didn't care much about giving offense. But when he called her a lover, he spoke some truth: she was a lover of her fellow human beings: as a typical Unitarian of her day, my mother followed the moral principle that you should love your neighbor as yourself; and she also followed the growing moral awareness that you should fight racism in the wider society.

Well, that is just one tiny incident among many others. A few of our churches became integrated and even truly inter-racial: First Unitarian in Chicago, Arlington Street Church in Boston, and others besides. The Unitarians and the Universalists merged together in 1961. Then in 1965, Dr. Martin Luther King sent his famous telegram to the leaders of all denominations, asking them to come to Selma, Alabama, to support his non-violent efforts to desegregate that city. Over one hundred Unitarian Universalist ministers, and more than one hundred Unitarian Universalist laypeople, heeded Dr. King's call and traveled to Alabama. Proportionately speaking, this was a large number of Unitarian Universalists, since we have always been a numerically small denomination — numerically small, but influential beyond our numbers.

One of the Unitarian Universalist ministers who heeded Dr. King's call was James Reeb. On March 9, Reeb and two other Unitarian Universalist ministers walked out of a cafe in Selma, and were attacked by some white men who called them "niggers," and badly beat them. James Reeb died of that beating two days later. Of course black Americans were being beaten and killed with alarming frequency, but James Reeb's death galvanized many people in the white establishment: that a white minister might be beaten to death because of his efforts to fight racism forced white America to confront some of the violence and hatred that racism spawned. Within days of Reeb's death, the president of the United States made a special statement supporting civil rights.

The Board of Trustees of the Unitarian Universalist Association was meeting when they heard that James Reeb had died, and they adjourned the meeting and immediately flew to Selma, where they reconvened their meeting. Rev. Victor Carpenter said of this action: "What a symbol! No other denomination could or did make such a profound statement of denominational solidarity with the Civil Rights movement or such an affirmation of the movement's black leadership." [1983 Minns lecture]

I tell you this story so that you can hear about the high point of Unitarian Universalist anti-racist work. Unfortunately, in the late 1960's, we Unitarian Universalists lost a great deal of momentum when our denomination was rocked by what has come to be known as the Black Empowerment Controversy.

By 1967, African Americans constituted about one percent of all Unitarian Universalists enough so that African American Unitarian Universalists started to connect with one another. On October 6, 1967, at a Unitarian Universalist gathering called "The Emergency Conference on the Black Rebellion," 37 African American Unitarian Universalists got together and framed a plan of action. They called for African American representation on key denominational committees; subsidies for African American ministers; and a new social justice organization to be called the Black Affairs Council which would be staffed entirely by African Americans and would be financed by the Unitarian Universalist Association in order to further justice for African Americans. You will notice that their central goal was to increase numbers of African Americans in leadership roles within the denomination.

To make a long story short, the Black Affairs Council was accused of being a separatist group. The notion of empowering African American ministers and lay leaders was difficult for white Unitarian Universalists to understand. The denomination voted to fund the social justice initiatives of the Black Affairs Council, and then when the budget got tight in 1969, funding was cut without adequate explanation. It is estimated that half of all African American Unitarian Universalists quit our denomination because of this controversy. For example, a young African American man named Bill Sinkford, who was president of the national youth organization in the late 1960's, left Unitarian Universalism out of frustration.

It took us a couple of decades to recover from that controversy. Let me give you a vivid image of our recovery. I told you how young Bill Sinkford quit Unitarian Universalism. Two decades later, he decided to come back; he became a Unitarian Universalist minister; and in June, 2001, he was elected to the presidency of our denomination, the first African American leader of a historically white denomination in the United States. I would argue that Bill Sinkford's leadership has been the most inspiring since the merger of Unitarians and Universalists in 1961.

While Bill Sinkford was away from our denomination, two other movements for full equality and full inclusion swept our denomination. In the 1970's and early 1980's, the feminist movement changed Unitarian Universalism: we got rid of the old sexist language in our hymns and in our bylaws, we changed our principles and purposes and included a seventh principle based on ecofeminist thinking, and we encouraged women in leadership roles until now half of all Unitarian Universalist ministers are women. In the 1980's and 1990's, we moved towards full acceptance of all persons regardless of sexual orientation, and we have gotten far enough in that effort that more than half our congregations are officially recognized as open and welcoming to gay, lesbian, and transgender persons, and we have gotten to the point where it is possible for a Unitarian Universalist minister to be openly gay, lesbian, or transgender.

And finally, in the last ten years, I have sensed a move back towards making racial justice a priority, the way it was for us in the 1960's. I think two different things are causing us to move in this direction. On the one hand, racism is on the increase in our wider society: schools are becoming more segregated, prisons are disproportionately filled with people of color, we're even starting to see new attempts at poll taxes to keep people of color from voting.

On the other hand, many people in their twenties and thirties, and even up to those of us in our forties, have come to expect a truly multiracial society. It is our positive ideal. I'll speak for myself for just a moment: I feel more comfortable in multiracial settings, to the point where I really don't want to be a member of an all-white church. I'm not the only one who feels this way. Lots of people who grew up as Unitarian Universalists were brought up believing in the ideal of a multiracial society — lots of other people who didn't grow up as Unitarian Universalists were brought up with those same values — we truly believe in a multiracial society. So here we all are, and one of the first things we want to do is make our churches multiracial.

Notice that I said "multiracial." Since the days of the Civil Rights movement, we have come to recognize that racism takes many different forms. There is racism against African Americans, but there is also racism against Asian Americans, Native Americans, Hispanics, Pacific Islanders, and so on. Recently, we have people like Tiger Woods and Barack Obama pointing out that they come from mixed-race backgrounds. While we have to recognize that the legacy of slavery has caused a unique set of problems for people of African descent, we also know that racism takes on many insidious forms. Indeed, we can go beyond racism and say that oppression takes on many different forms: the oppression of women, the oppression of sexual minorities, the oppression of people who don't speak English as their native language, the oppression of people who didn't happen to be born here in the United States. All these different kinds of oppression are kinds of evil that we must fight.

I would like to suggest to you that the fact that we can recognize the religious dimension of all these different kinds of oppression offers us an amazing religious opportunity. As a religious people, we know that we are called to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. We read it in the Hebrew Bible, and the Christian scriptures, in the Confucian Analects, indeed in all the great religious literature. We hear it from all the great religious and moral leaders down through

the ages: Buddha, Jesus, Mother Ann Lee of the Shakers, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King. And we know from our own reasoning processes that this is a great moral truth. In our time, in these United States, racism is one of the greatest issues that confronts us and requires us to act. As a religious people, we are concerned with what we do with our lives. So it makes sense that we should apply our religious principles to the issue of racism.

And here in First Unitarian Church, we are already doing that. Our church is in fact multiracial — I'd prefer it if we were more multiracial, but there is no way anyone can say that we are a totally lily-white church. Less visibly, we also incorporate a diversity of ethnic groups. If English isn't your native language, no one minds; if you were born in another country, no big deal. We are also at the forefront of fighting discrimination against gay, lesbian, and transgender persons. We are a church that is truly living out the "eighth principle" of Unitarian Universalism.

To put it most positively, we like diversity; and we are willing to actively work towards becoming an even more multiracial, multiethnic, diverse congregation. We know that means that we're going to be involved in anti-racism and anti-discrimination work at many different levels: here in our church perhaps, certainly in the wider New Bedford community, in the country as a whole.

We know it won't be easy at times. But it is an essential part of our religious values, and so we will persevere; and we will, my friends, we will overcome.