

The Last Shall be First: the foundation of our faith

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By Bill Johnston

I sometimes think the greatest mystery of our faith is that we manage to have churches at all. We are a people who make up our own minds. We adamantly reject the idea of a creed defining our collective beliefs. We go our own way, so to speak.

Yet, however uneasily, we do come together into congregations.

What is the glue that holds us together?

At the social level, it may be the enjoyment of like-minded people. But as a religion, one without the usual glue of shared beliefs, what holds us together are the promises we make to each other, our covenants. Unitarian Universalist historian Conrad Wright traces this back to the New England Puritans, from whom our faith evolved. Church members agreed to “walk together in mutual fellowship, in commitment to one another.” Their commitment was also to Jesus. But Wright says what distinguishes liberal religion is that there is no requirement of shared belief. In a covenant, “so long as the operative wording is “we unite,” and not “we believe,” the essential form of a liberal church is there.”

But, he emphasized, the heart of our covenant is commitment.

And the heart of commitment is love, says lay Unitarian Universalist historian Alice Blair Wesley. She writes of the 17th century New Englanders who founded one of our oldest churches, in Dedham, Massachusetts. She says “they understood the divine will of the loving God of the Universe to be for justice, peace and good laws in the whole society. *The* task of the free church could be summed—in their terms—as loving God and loving one another so well that in their own study and discussion, dispute and conference, prayer, consultation and more discussion in the free church, the members might learn together the divine will of the loving God for the whole society insofar as that will relates to justice, peace and reasonable laws. And, if so, the members would be called, compelled, bound to proclaim it and try to bring it to bear on their whole society.”

That’s powerful stuff. It echoes the words we read responsively, which I take as saying the world needs a religion committed to our principles. Our religion is not just about us, it’s about the needs of the larger society.

Our congregations are still based on covenant, on promises to walk together in certain ways, in pursuit of a vision of a world transformed by our love.

To become a member of this congregation, you are expected to “subscribe” to the church’s statement of purpose and its mission/covenant statement. The statement of purpose says in part, “Members of the Congregation, while free to hold diverse beliefs concerning the nature of God, Humanity and the Universe, are all committed to the preservation of personal integrity, the continuing search for truth through the use of critical inquiry, the democratic process in human relations and the obligation to work for the greater good of all humanity.”

Our mission/covenant statement starts,

“We covenant to build a spiritual home, a house of many rooms.

Its foundation is the earth.

Its timbers are the Unitarian Universalist principles of belief and behaviour.”

And the statement of principles, shared by the Canadian Unitarian Council and the Unitarian Universalist Association in the U.S., is a covenant in which our congregations promise to affirm

and promote our seven principles. It might be useful to turn to them. Go to Hymn 1 in your hymnbooks, then turn back a page.

Over the course of this year, this congregation has decided to focus our worship on our seven principles, one principle a month, starting with this month.

So I thought the historical context I've outlined might be useful.

Despite our rejection of creeds, there have always been attempts to define what we hold in common. Our current statement, as the Rev. Edward Frost puts it, is "the latest in a long history of attempts to state, if not a common faith, at least a workable consensus about what brings us together." The committee that drafted the current principles said "what is shared ... is not so much religious belief as ethical principle."

In short, our principles are more about what we do, or should do, than what we believe. That's in keeping with a religion that says we emphasize deeds not creeds.

This statement was approved in 1985, after lengthy consultation, dating back to 1977. Recently, a task force of the Unitarian Universalist Association proposed a revised statement but the UUA General Assembly rejected it in June. A task force of the Canadian Unitarian Council recently consulted widely on possible changes and concluded there was no strong desire to alter them. So they have some staying power.

I think that's in part because the principles have greater depth than might first appear. Underlying the principles is a deep and accurate sense of reality.

It's found in our seventh principle, the only one that contains a statement of fact. That fact is that existence is interdependent. Everything is enmeshed in webs of connection. The seventh principle is generally viewed as environmental, but in fact, it's a statement about the nature of reality, all of reality.

Everything is part of the whole. More importantly, everything *emerges* from the whole. People don't create themselves, they are created by their parents and the societies in which they grow up. At a deeper level, people emerged from the very special environment that is the Earth.

The idea that we are part of a greater unity is consistent with a central theme of Unitarian thinking. Originally, the unity in our name was about the unity, not the trinity, of God. But over time, Unitarians have also emphasized the unity of all of humanity and the unity of all of reality.

If that's the ultimate truth, then our seventh principle should be our first, for it is the condition of everything else. Which is what I meant by the title of today's sermon, the Last Shall be First.

In a sense, the rest of the principles can be derived from that basic understanding. Given the fact of interdependence, they define how we should live.

We should respect the interdependent web that is the basis of our existence.

But we should also respect each part of the web, and so in our first principle we promise to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. I'd go further. In an interdependent, living planet, every person and every thing has worth.

Consistent with that, we should also act with justice, equity and compassion, we should accept one another, we should encourage spiritual maturity, we should responsibly search for truth and meaning, we should honour the right of conscience and recognize the value of democratic process.

Acting on those principles would strengthen the interrelated fabric of existence.

Finally, we come to the sixth principle, which is my re-ordering of our principles would be the last. The sixth is the only principle that speaks of a goal. What are we trying to achieve in our congregations? World community with peace, liberty and justice for all. The word "all" was no

doubt written to apply to all people. But if we truly grasp what interdependence means, we need justice and peace for *all* of the Earth community.

I'm sure most of us have no trouble acknowledging that we live in an interdependent world. Yet I'm sure we also resist it. The Western world is steeped in individualism and our tradition, with its dissenters from the mainstream and its emphasis on individual conscience, is at the individualistic end of an individualistic culture. I think it can be hard for us to really feel, to really *get*, the full depth of what interdependence means. Especially interdependence with the rest of the Earth community.

We still act as if the Earth can absorb endless waste and produce endless resources for our use. Our economy depends on endless growth—look at the turmoil caused by the slight drop of growth that is our current recession. Yet endless growth in a finite world is both madness and impossibility. The biggest actors on the world stage are corporations legally committed to maximize shareholder returns, at the expense if necessary, and often, of human wellbeing or planetary health. We act as if the Earth existed solely for human use, as if we were somehow exempt from the realities of life.

Here in our own so-called sacred space, people litter, leave lights and photocopiers on, don't sort waste for recycling. We're slow to get at renovations to reduce energy use. I find it frustrating, but then I remind myself that I drive too often when I should walk.

Our deeds betray the values we proclaim.

I keep looking for some way to really grasp the reality of interdependence. Let me share my latest attempt.

It's an attempt at focused or mindful awareness.

Look down at what you are wearing. Think of where it was made. Think of the person who cut the pieces and the person who sewed them together. Think of the farmer who grew the cotton or hemp or raised the sheep for the wool. Or of those who pumped oil from the earth to produce artificial fabrics. Think of how your clothes were shipped to the store where you bought them and how they were packaged.

Think of them all with gratitude. But think too of whether the price you paid was enough to provide a living wage all down the line, to the sales clerk, wholesale employees, shippers, seamstresses, farmers. We sell fair trade coffee in this church to remind ourselves of the links in our food chain and to pay farmers a fair price, as we enjoy with gratitude a well-grown product of the Earth.

Now take a deep breath.

As you breathe in, you are sharing the air with all the rest of the earth. You are breathing same air as Chinese labourers and Iranian protestors, as whales and worms. And that blanket of air that sustains our lives also keeps the temperature on our Earth within a liveable range.

Take another breath. And as you do, remember that the oxygen essential for your life is produced by plants. As you breath back out, you are releasing carbon dioxide that is taken in by plants as the fuel for photosynthesis. As we breathe, in and out, we are in a direct, constant, reciprocal relationship with the plant life of the world.

The oxygen in the air you draw into your lungs is carried throughout your body, to sustain your cells, by your bloodstream. Your blood, like the rest of your body, is mostly water. Water is finite. We share it with all of the rest of the planet. There is no life without water.

That same water, evaporating into the air, then cooling and falling as rain, constantly cleans the atmosphere.

Air and water also deeply connect us with the history of our planet. Life began some 3.8 billion years ago in the Earth's oceans. The first living things were single celled organisms, bacteria and archaea. Bacteria evolved the processes that made more complex forms of life possible. That includes the critical function of breaking down wastes.

It also includes photosynthesis, which turns carbon dioxide in the presence of sunlight into sugars, releasing oxygen. Scientists believe photosynthesis was primarily responsible for most of the oxygen in the atmosphere.

That includes the ozone layer, which protects the Earth's surface from ultraviolet light. Life was able to leave the protection of the seas and populate the land about a half billion years ago only when the ozone layer was in place.

Life, in other words, created the conditions for more life.

It's worth noting that there was nothing inevitable about the evolution of humans. The brilliant biologist Stephen Jay Gould emphasizes that evolution is random. Mammals, including the quite recent humans, were able to flourish only after a catastrophe 65 million years ago that ended the 180 million year dominance of dinosaurs. In the wide variety of life, illustrated on the cover of your order of service, the most successful life form is still bacteria. We humans, by the way, are part of the animals, top right.

Let's return to your breathing and the air in your lungs. It is only possible for your bloodstream to absorb oxygen if it contains a mineral from the Earth, iron. Lacking iron, we suffer anemia and feel tired because our cells don't get the oxygen they need.

It's only possible for your body to absorb calcium, to build and sustain your bones, because the sunlight on your skin produces Vitamin D.

The sunlight also creates the food we eat, through photosynthesis. Everything we eat is either a plant or an animal that eats plants.

The book *Right Relationship: Building a Whole Earth Economy* stresses: "The fundamental wealth on the earth, on which all else depends, is the ability to maintain life itself, which is made possible by the ability of green plants to convert sunlight into sugars." Without that, there is no wealth, no human life.

There is another astonishing fact about our bodies. At the heart of every one of our cells is a creature with its own genetic code, its own reproductive cycle, in effect, its own existence. Every cell contains mitochondria, which provide the energy for cell life. We might think of them as little aliens within, except that they are not aliens at all, they are both distinct and yet thoroughly us.

Moreover, a large part of our bodies are bacteria, which are as essential as the mitochondria. Bacteria in our guts digest our food. Bacteria in our guts also produce Vitamin B12, without which we'd die. Recent McMaster University research has suggested that bacteria in our guts play a role in thinking.

Talk about interdependence! In effect, what we think of as our selves is really a community, a community of beings. And we have life only within the larger community of all of the Earth.

Creatures are only possible within the ecosystems in which they evolve. We are Earthlings. And ultimate importance attaches to the ecosystem, not any creature within it. The whole is more important than any part, any species, even humans.

Our vision in this congregation is of living in right relationship. Here's a useful definition, from the book *Right Relationship*: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, resilience and beauty of the commonwealth of life." Let me repeat that: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, resilience and beauty of the commonwealth of life."

The psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has written: “One cannot lead a life that is truly excellent without feeling that one belongs to something greater or more permanent than oneself.” That may be God. It is certainly the Earth.

Every breath, every sip of water, every bite of food, is participation in that greater belonging.

Obviously, it is impossible to live without some harm to other creatures. But if we can remain aware of our intimate relationship with the wider planet, we will limit that harm. With that awareness, every act of turning off a light, reducing waste, fighting for fairer laws, opposing major polluters or helping another being becomes a moment of sacred connection, as well as a useful reduction of harm.

Let’s be clear: Grasping the essential interdependence of life, really getting it, is essential but not sufficient. As the great 20th century Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams reminded us, good intentions have to take institutional form or they are just sentimental. We need to embody changed thinking in our buildings, in our actions, in our lives together. We need to grow our capacity to understand the issues and to fight for a more just and sustainable society.

We need to not just get it, but to get at it.

Your social justice committee is proposing a number of admittedly small steps, on your behalf. They are outlined in an insert in your order of service. We hope you will join us after this service to give us your thoughts on what we are doing and what more we, all of us, can do together to live our principles.

The state of the world can be overwhelming. The human population is too large, we are exhausting too many resources and disrupting virtually all the systems that sustain complex life. We need radical change, urgently, but the resistance from most governments and most corporations is massive. For me, there’s only one way to cope. That’s to work with others dedicated to strengthening the bonds of humanity and the integrity, resilience and beauty of the world. Cynics say nothing will change. They are wrong. The truth is that the world is changing all the time, everything we do changes it, it’s only a question of whether it’s for better or worse. I find my joy in working with those who share the liberal dream that a better world is possible.

The wonderful truth of our principles, and of their foundation in a world in which everything is connected to everything else, is this: that you are not alone and everything you do, and more powerfully, everything *we* do together, matters.