Beyond the Seven Principles: The Core of Our Faith

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I. Introduction

The line of thought I will outline here proposes a new approach to the persisting problem of Unitarian Universalist identity. We have struggled for more than a hundred years to establish a body of stated beliefs that defines the core of our faith. This paper looks in a different direction for the answer.

Though the idea is new, it is not without precedent. After the Unitarians and the Universalists merged in the early 1960s, the identity issue was experienced by the new denomination as even more pressing than usual, so the administration was moved to offer a substantial prize for the best sermon on the subject. Not long ago I tracked down a copy of the winning entry. Its title was "Unitarian Mythology," and the writer was Deane Starr.

His sermon was excellent, but, oddly, it did not seek our identity in a body of stated beliefs. Starr saw our identity as defined rather by a set of shared, tacitly held values, concepts, and assumptions: understood but unspoken — taken-for-granted. I was delighted to discover this because I too had been exploring this subliminal realm. I had long ago concluded it was the seat and source of the core of our faith.

The science of linguistics, cognitive linguistics in particular, has shed considerable light recently on this tacit level of our thought processes. George Lakoff has for many years been professor of linguistics at UC Berkeley, and in a book published in 2002 he defined his field of study. Cognitive science, he said, is a "discipline that studies how people conceptualize the world."

A subfield is "cognitive linguistics," which is concerned with "issues of worldview, that is, with our everyday conceptualization, reasoning, and language… how we conceptualize our everyday lives and how we think and talk about them."[1] It is the study, not of abstract logic but rather of "normal, everyday thought."[2]

"Many people believe that they are consciously aware of their own worldview and all one has to do to find out about people's views of the world is to ask them. Perhaps the most fundamental result of cognitive science is that this is not true. What people will tell you about their worldview does not necessarily accurately reflect how they reason, how they categorize, how they speak, and how they act."[3]

"One of the most fundamental results in cognitive science… is that most of our thought is unconscious — not unconscious in the Freudian sense of being repressed, but unconscious simply in that we are not aware of it. We think and talk at too fast a rate and at too deep a level to have conscious awareness and control over everything we think and say."[4] Cognitive linguistics is the study of "what, exactly, our unconscious system of concepts is and how we think and talk using that system of concepts."[5]

"Most of our thought is unconscious," in the sense that "we are not aware of it," Lakoff said. This insight has far-reaching implications, not only for everyday life but also for liberal religion in particular.

The intent of this paper is to gain some degree of awareness of the unconscious system of concepts, assumptions, and values that form the core of our Unitarian Universalist faith.

I began to pursue this line of thought when I noticed, as I am sure you have as well, that there is often a marked disparity between what people say they believe and what they actually do. It struck me that their effective religion must be located not in what they profess, but rather in the depths of the self. Our effective religion contains not only a tacit understanding of the world but also our feelings

toward it, as well as the constellation of values that actually direct our actions: that is, our vision of the world and what we care about in it — as reflected in our actions.

I also noted that many religious scholars asserted that all religions are rooted in an underlying set of taken-for-granted values, assumptions, and presuppositions. Scholars use various terms to designate this elusive yet highly significant element within us, such as standpoint, cognitive set, pre-articulate knowledge, pre-reflective knowledge, mindset, tacit knowledge, etc. Joseph Campbell used the phrase "our own most secret motivating depths" to refer to the phenomenon. William James saw it as the source of "all our outer deeds and decisions."

Huston Smith put it like this: "Assumptions which underlie our outlooks on life refract the world in ways that condition our acts and our institutions… our sense of right and wrong, our criteria of success… how we worship God or whether, indeed, we have a God to worship."[6]

There is a parallel assertion made by the British classical scholar, Gilbert Murray: "A creed or catechism is, of course, not at all the same thing as the real religion of those who subscribe to it." Our deepest and most effective beliefs, he went on, are those on which we act without question, which we simply take for granted.[7]

Or again, James Luther Adams in his classic essay, "A Faith for Free Men and Women, " observed that "we must not believe every pious person's religion to be what they say it is… They may actually give their deepest loyalty to something quite different… Find out what that is and you have found their religion."[8] Adams is here making a point I want especially to emphasize, namely, that our effective religion is found, not in our words but deep within us. It is rarely articulated. Yet, this underlying set of values and assumptions goes far to determine what we think, feel, say, and do.

John Buehrens, while President of the UUA, made a striking observation that points our attention toward this subliminal realm lying beyond or beneath the seven Principles. He said in one of his President's Letters that although it is plain we are radically diverse in our stated beliefs, "there is an underlying unity in which we are involved… We do not have to create this unity, it is given."[9] The phrase "underlying unity" directs our attention to the core of our faith.

There is some evidence that many of our people now not only sense this tacit unity, but agree by a large majority on its general contents. When they were asked in the Fulfilling the Promise survey, "What is the 'glue' that binds individual UUs and congregations together?" a substantial majority chose the response, "Shared values and principles." The editor of the *UU World*, Tom Stites, summing up the findings of the entire survey asserted that it made clear our movement is growing more diverse in many ways, but it has a very solid core.[10]

II. The Depth Dimension in Religion

A brief historical note: early in the 19th century, as the Unitarian and Universalist movements on this continent were developing, they were liberal Christian in identity. However, in both traditions during the latter half of that century, controversy began growing on the issue of identity.[11] Emerson's "Divinity School Address" and Theodore Parker's "Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity" in mid-century were influential in generating the controversy.[12] This was the beginning of an evolution that has continued down to the present. In effect, a cultural mutation began transforming Unitarianism, and parallel developments occurred in Universalism.[13]

A forerunner of this cultural mutation was apparent at least as early as the 1820s, when William Ellery Channing, in a public address, vigorously rejected two central Christian doctrines, the Incarnation and the Atonement. "I am astonished and appalled," he said, "by the gross manner in which 'Christ's blood' is often spoken of, as if his… bodily sufferings could contribute to our salvation;

as if aught else than his spirit, his truth, could redeem us."[15] Channing was here already engaged in separating the transient from the permanent in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Our religion is liberal Christian in its origins; and we have evolved in the 20th century to a point where a majority of our people, including myself, no longer describe themselves as Christian. Yet, this large group has not so far been able to define the new identity that presumably has been emerging.

If we are not liberal Christian, what exactly are we? Majorities have proved often to be wrong, sometimes tragically wrong. Is it possible that the majority is leading the movement into destruction of its essential nature, propelling it into oblivion?

The statement of Principles and Purposes created in the mid-1980s has given the identity of the institution some degree of definition by creating a consensual statement of values and goals on which we can agree. This is a beginning, but there is much more.

Persisting uncertainty about our identity has made it difficult for us to explain our religion to others (and even to ourselves). The recent Fulfilling the Promise survey posed the question to our people because the answer is still in doubt. At the same time, we have also sensed that, at some level, in some way, we are one, that there is a vital bond between us. It is also an observable fact that, when we gather in groups, we experience feelings of kinship. We resonate with each other. What is the source of this paradox: persisting inability to agree on our identity, on one hand, and a felt sense of unity on the other?

The answer lies in the direction pioneered by Deane Starr. Our people in their stated beliefs may be Universalist or Unitarian, Christian or Jewish, Humanist or Pagan, theist or atheist, Buddhist, Muslim, or whatever; but the movement as a whole is not identified by any or by all of these belief systems. The core of our faith is found rather in its underlying dynamics. Which, from time to time we manage to express partially in words (as in the statement of Principles and Purposes). However, there is much more to be discovered beyond the Principles.

The intent of this paper, then, is to explore the contents of the underlying unity that John Buehrens called to our attention. The task, as he indicated, is not to create this unity, but rather to get in touch with it, and then give expression to as many of its implications as we can.

III. Believing as a Hallowed Act

The words belief and believe have a wide range of murky meanings, so I should explain that I will be using the terms in the sense in which James Fowler defines them in his *Stages of Faith*, that is, intellectual assent to religious doctrines or creeds.[16]

Judeo-Christianity is a centuries old tradition rooted in truth revealed by God to people in the ancient world. The tradition has been identified by a system of beliefs based on the sacred scriptures in which the word of God is recorded. Beliefs in Christ as savior and in the inspiration of the Bible are central in the tradition.

Unitarian Universalist religion is currently given form, much less by a set of traditional beliefs based on scripture, than it is by personal experience and judgment, by reason, intuition and contemporary knowledge. Christians in our congregations share these characteristics. Their additional commitment to the Bible, theism, and the centrality of Jesus for religious life in the Western world is not only historically valid but also spiritually rich.

Unfortunately, a substantial number of non-Christian Unitarian Universalists look down on Christians as inferior at best, unbearable at worst. This is not only ignorance; it also fits nicely the dictionary definition of bigotry: "stubborn intolerance of any creed, belief, or opinion that differs from one's own." It is important that we not fall into the regrettable and common human error of concluding

that our own religious orientation is superior to all others. The fact is that both Christian and non-Christian religions have had (and still have) significant survival value for humanity.

UU Christians have a clear conception of the essential identity of our movement. They know it to be liberal Christian, as it was initially. Non-Christian UUs like myself, on the other hand, have struggled for many years to define any new identity that may have been developing since the middle of the 19th century.

A complicating factor in this regard has been the extraordinary value placed on correct belief in Western culture. Believing has been regarded for centuries as a matter of life or death — of eternal life indeed. A shared body of stated belief is what has identified most Western religions. As a result, religious liberals have long felt an obligation to frame a statement of shared beliefs that identify their movement. The fact is our stated beliefs are widely diverse.

Yet, believing is still hallowed by most religious liberals; even though, in practice, fervent believers everywhere have proved again and again to be a source of conflict, intolerance, persecution, oppression, bloodshed, and destruction. Believing is as often demonic in its outcome, as it is healing. For example, Muslim, Jewish, and Christian fundamentalism around the world is currently inspiring believers to wreak havoc in their own societies as well as others.

IV. The Unitarian Universalist Principles

The Unitarian Universalist Principles, adopted by the denomination in 1985, represent our most recent attempt to gain consensus on some of the explicit implications of the underlying unity that is the core of our faith. These Principles are remarkable in the history of organized religion. They were not drafted by a panel of theological experts, not by a charismatic and articulate leader, nor by ranking members of a hierarchy. They emerged out of extended dialogue with as many of our members in as many of our congregations as possible. The Principles emerged out of the inner life of our people, shaped by their thoughts, feelings, and values.

Have you noticed that we do not memorize these Principles? We don't have to memorize them because they live within us, are part of our individual identities. Most of us held them in our hearts even before we discovered the church; and, when we did discover it, often it was with an elated sense of recognition. We resonated with the worldview of the congregation. The underlying unity had already taken form in us. As we experienced the process of personal development in our society, we had absorbed into ourselves from the culture those values and assumptions that struck us personally as true, right, moral, just, and creative. The Principles as a result are not just something we believe, but something that we are. We resonate with our church communities because what identifies them is also a significant part of our own identity.

I find when I look at the Principles on paper, when I take them in as a whole, I sense a depth dimension to them. I got in touch with Walter Royal Jones who chaired the task force that carried out the intra-denominational dialogue out of which the Principles emerged, and asked him what he thought about this. He was delighted by my inquiry because he reported that he too had found himself musing along these lines. He aptly described what he sensed underlying the Principles as "hidden commitments" or "reality assumptions." Tacit elements, understood but not expressed — taken-for-granted.

I have been working for years to express in words some of these hidden commitments or assumptions, some of the contents of the underlying unity that contains the core of our faith. However, before I again undertake this effort, it is important that we have the Principles immediately available in words. I will list them in somewhat abbreviated form so that they can be apprehended readily as a whole, as well as individually; I will list them also, not in their usual order, but in related pairs.

We agree to affirm and promote:

1. The worth and dignity of the individual.
7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence.

2. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations.
6. A just world community.

3. Acceptance of each other in our congregations.
5. Democratic process in church and society.

4. A lifelong search for truth and meaning.

Notice that, seen as a whole, the seven Principles outline the entire range of human experience: the individual, personal and group relations in church and in society, relations between societies in a world community of nations, all set down in their ultimate context, the interdependent web of all existence.

It is of considerable interest to note that these seven Principles are an expression of the sixth and final stage in James Fowler's *Stages of Faith*, a stage of development he calls "Universalizing Faith." Individuals at this stage of development, Fowler says, experience a sense of commitment to an ultimate environment that is "inclusive of all being. They have become incarnators and actualizers of the spirit of an inclusive and fulfilled human community." They live with "felt participation in a power that unifies and transforms the world."[17]

The UU Principles clearly embody this "universalizing faith" outlined by Fowler. It is not, of course, that all (or any) of our people have attained this ultimate stage of faith, but rather that they consensually "covenant to affirm and promote" it.

V. The Core of Our Faith

What then are some of the tacit assumptions, commitments, and values implicit in the Principles? These will be seen also to be elements in the underlying unity a whole.

First of all, it is evident that we share a philosophical assumption with science: namely, that humanity exists in an immense and unified reality; that we live out our lives as an integral part of this immensity; that its nature is coherent, is understandable (at least in part) by the mind. We use the phrase "the interdependent web of all existence" to refer to this immense and unified reality.

This reality in turn is integrated, in fragmentary form, into our own being, as our experience of it accumulates over the years. It develops within us in symbolic, biochemical, and/or electrical patterns. It accumulates also in the human community as a whole, in books, articles, and mathematic notations. Sorting out these fragments of experience within us into an approximation of reality is a lifetime task.

The fourth Principle ("a free and responsible search for truth and meaning") rests upon an assumption that we have some knowledge of reality, and that the remainder of this vast and complex entity remains, for the present at least, cloaked in mystery.

There is also another assumption underlying the "search for truth and meaning:" a tacit commitment to grow in awareness and understanding of the interdependent web of all existence. This persisting exploration of reality is characteristic of the variant form of organized religion we have

developed. This questing form appears in some individuals in all times and traditions, and wherever or whenever they appear they are our kin.

There is a faith assumption underlying the Principles as a whole, that is, a trust in the powers and potential of humanity, and an assumption that if, in community, we open ourselves to the nature of things and pool our inevitably limited individual perspectives, awareness, truth, and meaning may grow within us. We need each other to find our way.

Underlying the Principles as a whole is a highly significant value: an active caring about the quality of life, not only for ourselves, but for others as well. Which is to say, tacitly expressed in the seven Principles is the essential spirit of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Principles affirm the value in human life of caring, love, and compassion; and this is the core of the teachings of Jesus and the Hebrew prophets. The Principles as a whole affirm and promote a good life not only for our own species but also for the other species caught up with us in the interdependent web of life on earth.

In this regard, it is of interest to note that Earl Morse Wilbur, after a lifetime given over to research and writing on the history of Unitarianism, speculated about the future of the movement at the end of his two volume work on the subject.

Writing in the 1940s, Wilbur said that given the direction of its development in the 19th and early 20th centuries, it was apparent to him that the movement would continue to pay less and less attention to the letter of the religious tradition, "and to place increasing emphasis on the application of the principles and spirit of Christianity" to the conduct of life. Wiliam Ellery Channing had made a parallel observation when he rejected the doctrine of the Atonement during the 1820s. It was, he said, not Christ's blood that would redeem us, but rather "his spirit, his truth."[18]

Also underlying the Principles as a whole is a tacit assumption that they provide us with a working hypothesis for promoting the creative cultural evolution of humanity; that when acted upon the Principles will contribute to human survival by creating a more harmonious social and international order.

The Principles must be regarded, not as ultimate truth, but rather as a working hypothesis aimed at enhancing the quality of life on earth. We hold a tacit conviction also that it is our task in organized religion to formulate and reformulate these hypotheses over time, on the basis of our consensual experience and understanding of that evolving reality in which we live out our lives.

VI. Transformative Truth

In addition to these components inherent in the Principles, the underlying unity that holds our identity contains other tacit elements. There is an assumption that truth is always greater than any verbal statement of it. This insight was expressed centuries ago in the Tao Te Ching. "The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao." An unspoken UU maxim then is, "Beware of final answers."

There is a complementary and highly significant assumption about the nature of truth contained in the core of our faith. It is an assumption that is central in defining our identity.

A survey of our history makes clear that Unitarian Universalists care deeply about understanding and truth. They care less about revealed truth than they do about "transformative truth," that is, truth that transforms and enhances the quality of our selves, of our lives, of human existence as a whole. Transformative truth promotes creative cultural evolution; promotes self-transcendence.

Many Unitarian Universalists throughout the 20th century have lamented the undeniable fact that the movement lacks certainty. It offers no clear answers to the questions raised by existence. Why is this? The movement is rooted in a tacit and highly significant assumption that the kind of truth that matters most in religion is transformative truth. This is found, not in words, not in sacred scriptures or professed beliefs, but in ourselves, in each living human being — within.

Our religion is rooted not in revealed and written truth but rather in the unique experience and awareness, the deep inwardness of each person. The truth we seek is truth progressively realized in each individual. We are tacitly aware the truth that matters above all must take form within each of us. We assume that living truth is found not in words but in ourselves — "in our own most secret motivating depths."[19]

To be sure, we ask our people to learn as much as possible from the stated wisdom of the past as well as the present; but, ultimately, to trust their own experience, insight, and intuition — in community.

We assume that transformative truth emerges in individuals who are engaged in searching for it, individuals who are both in community, and in touch with much of the wisdom of all ages and traditions.

Motivated by this fertile assumption and by the remainder of the underlying unity, we have developed an imperfect but promising cultural prototype: an institutional form of individualized religion.

Because of the underlying unity that identifies Unitarian Universalism, our members resonate with each other, even though their stated beliefs are widely various. Each of our congregations at its best resonates with the larger fellowship of other UU congregations, and resonates within itself as a caring community. At its best, this community supports, stimulates, affirms, and offers love to its people as they seek continually to enlarge their awareness and understanding of themselves, others, and the world.

The gathering of the community in worship, in search and celebration of truth and meaning, is a life-affirming act, and the space where it occurs is a holy place.

VII. Conclusion: Elevator Explanation

All of the forgoing material is a long answer to the question, "What is the core of our faith?" Though it is lengthy, it is no doubt only a partial description of the contents of the underlying unity that defines our movement. We also need a short answer that, because of its limited length, must necessarily leave out a lot, but that will give others a valid insight into our faith. We might put it like this:

We believe in
the spirit of Christianity
rather than its doctrines.
This spirit is love: that is,
actively caring about
the well being of others
as well as our own, and actively caring about the
quality of life on earth.
It is a spirit found in
all the major religions
of the world.

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[1] George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 3.
[2] Ibid, 5.
[3] Ibid, 36.
[4] Ibid, 4.
[5] Ibid, 5.

[6] Huston Smith, *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind*, (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 1989), 3.
[7] Gilbert Murray, *Five Stages of Greek Religion* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1955), 167.
[8] David Parke, *The Epic of Unitarianism* (Boston: Starr King Press, undated), 150.
[9] John Buehrens, "Reflections from the President of the UUA," *UU World*, September/October 1994, 2.
[10] Tom Stites, "Diverse Theologies, Common Values," *UU World*, May/June 1998, 36.
[11] David Robinson, *The Unitarian and the Universalists* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 68ff, 117ff; Charles H. Lyttle, *Freedom Moves West: A History of the Western Unitarian Conference 1852-1952* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952), 163ff.
[12] Robinson, 76.
[13] Ibid, 65.
[15] Daniel Walker Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy 1805-1861* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 42.
[16] James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 295.
[17] Ibid, 200-01.
[18] Howe, 42.
[19] Joseph Campbell, *Myths to Live By* (New York: Bantam Books, 1973), 24.