

[4th Principle](#): A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;

We Unitarian Universalists generally speaking love ideas. We like to think we like to talk about what we are thinking about, we even like to argue about what we are thinking about. If you look at our principles for the most part they are full of head/thinking words, not so many heart/feeling words.

Sometimes we get criticized for thinking too much and not taking enough action. Sometimes that takes the form of committees spending all their time discussing, and evaluating, researching and not so much time doing. Sometimes as a denomination we spend more time talking about justice than we do getting out and getting our hands dirty working for justice.

Some of you might have guessed last Sunday that I was a philosophy major in college. When I was in college and when I was in seminary I liked to remember the quote that is in the Order of Service today "The society which scorns excellence in plumbing as a humble activity and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy: neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water." [John W. Gardner](#) I first came across that quote when I was in high school - my favorite English teacher had a poster with that saying hanging in his classroom. I became a philosophy major because I liked ideas and I liked thinking about ideas. At the same time it has been important for me to remember that as important as theories and ideas are

there are other just as equally important things. We cannot simply live in our heads we must be more wholistic than that. Somewhere I heard the phrase "Ideas without action are just hallucinations." I might say it a little more gently - Thinking and doing go hand in hand.

A free and responsible search for truth and meaning can lead to ideas and that can change the world. It is not just our actions that change the world. Our actions are important but they must be grounded in that search for truth and meaning. Ideas are powerful

Have you ever had that experience where you hear a new idea and you think "Why didn't I think of that?" That's when I know what ever I am hearing is a good idea. I'd like to look at some ideas that have changed the world and then some ideas that will change the world.

## **9. Zero**

Although zero has been around since the time of the Babylonians, it didn't infiltrate Western thinking until the 12th Century when Italian mathematician, Leonardo Fibonacci included it in his book "Liber Abaci." Once it was finally adopted, it paved the way for the concept of decimals, allowing humankind to advance its knowledge of mathematics and logic. Along with the zero Fibonacci introduced arabic numerals. Up until this time in Western Europe the Roman way of doing math was used. [\[1\]](#) And so people did business in roman numerals and if they needed calculations done they would need to go a person who was trained to use a kind of physical abacus designed for roman numerals. It was difficult for

the small merchant to afford to hire someone to do the calculations. And it was hard for folks to do any kind of inventory, or to keep really good accounting records. Commerce as we know it is dependent on the zero.

In his book "The Man of Numbers," Keith Devlin makes the point the Fibonacci was the Bill Gates or Steve Jobs of his time. In a similar way that computers have become personal and not only located in institutions of knowledge, simple math became available to the many. People no longer had to go to an expensive expert to have their math done. When the members of this congregation vote on our annual budget we can thank Fibonacci for that. We wouldn't be able to create a budget using Roman Numerals. When you turn on your computer or use your cell phone you can thank Fibonacci. without the zero we would not have a the concept of a binary systems and without the binary system we would not have the computers that we do.

Zero - at first it seems like a pretty humble idea but it is not is it?

### **Soap - really what it does**

Difficult to imagine, or for that matter, smell, a society without soap. It dates back to Biblical times but, the great soap-related hygiene revolution didn't happen until the mid-19th Century when Ignaz Semmelweis, a sharp Hungarian doctor working in Vienna, noticed babies died more often after they were delivered by medical students rather than midwives. He realized medical students had often performed autopsies just prior, which contaminated their hands with microbes. He instigated a regime of hand-

washing and infant deaths dropped substantially making clear the benefits of hand-washing. [2] It is a common place thing soap nowadays. We think of it as just an ordinary cleaning tool. But once that idea that soap could clean off - get rid of - microbes was understood then something could be done. Handwashing protocols could be put in place and lives saved.

### **Antibiotics -**

We may be overusing antibiotics at this moment. But it would be difficult to not notice the difference they have made in our health. When I think of the Victorian era I think of a time when people were pretty rigid and focussed on manners and keeping the world neat and tidy. But if I factor in a deep seated fear of illness learned from so many people dying from illnesses a focus on cleanliness makes a lot of sense. Antibiotics help to keep us from having the full blown pandemics that were pretty common place in times gone past.

### **What about the idea of Farming**

Ask people what the most important historical revolution is and their answers might include: the Industrial Revolution, the Information Revolution, or maybe even the French Revolution. But without the Neolithic Revolution, none of the above would have taken place. It is this period of time, more than 14,000 years ago, which modern-day farming can be traced back to. Agriculture allowed hunter-gatherer societies to form permanent dwellings. With food no longer the sole motivation for existence, the way was paved for the development of government, trading and individual specialization. [3] Someone over 14,000 years ago looked

around and thought there has got to be an easier way. Instead of me going out and looking for these plants why don't I take their seeds and put them in the ground near where I live.

## **Evolution**

Once described as "the single best idea anyone has ever had," English naturalist Charles Darwin's "Theory of Evolution" proposes that all life, including humans, is related and is descended from a common ancestor. Prior to Darwin's theory, published in "On the Origin of Species" in 1859, it was accepted that man came from an archetype created by God, and was set apart from animals. Darwin's theories showed creation had taken longer than the Biblical seven days and that man was, in fact, likely to be descended from apes. As well as launching a revolution in biology, his idea irrevocably shook the human race's conception of where they come from.

[\[4\]](#)

## **World Wide Web**

In a matter of decades since it was invented in 1989 by English scientist Tim Berners-Lee, the World Wide Web has grown from a few pages to somewhere in the hundreds of billions, according to best guesstimates. In among all those pages exist a myriad of sites giving people access to information and opportunities that didn't exist previously. Although not all the freedoms available on the Internet are positive, the fact that in the present anyone can be, for example, a journalist, a dj or a filmmaker is changing how we live daily. Only time will tell, however, the full impact of

this revolution on human society. [\[5\]](#)

I wanted to end this sermon with a series of ideas that will change the world. Those were harder to find. I could find lots of lists, lots of articles titled something like 10 ideas that will change the world but they were ideas that seemed too small, like electric clothes.

But I think that it is hard to see the ideas that will change the world. We cannot predict the future. And we may not always be able to see the impact of what it is that is being invented. Did the inventors of the internet ever conceive of Facebook - I doubt it. Did those first farmers see that their idea would change human life so that Art and philosophy, science , math could be studied and developed. Did they know that they were going to change the world like that - I doubt it. Probably they were thinking along the lines of it will take less work to get the food, and I can feed my tribe better.

I have been speaking about ideas that change the world - but really it is not the ideas that change the world - it is the people who have the ideas, who are committed to the ideas, who live with the ideas and do not give up. In a commencement speech that Steve Jobs gave in 2005 he said, "you can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. You have to trust in something — your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever."

At the center of our faith we trust the search for truth and meaning. We trust that the search will create a more beloved community. And along with the search we trust the searchers. Those among us who are willing to have the idea. And like the child in the story I read this morning (What Do You Do with An Idea?) we trust the searchers to nurture their idea, let grow, and share it with the world. Again quoting Steve Jobs:

Here's to the crazy ones. The misfits, the rebels. The troublemakers. The round pegs in the square holes. The ones who see things differently. They're not fond of rules. You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them. About the only thing you can't do is ignore them. Because they change things. They push the human race forward. And while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius. Because the ones who are crazy enough to think that they can change the world, are the ones who do.

In a world without end may it be so.