

In our fifth principle we affirm the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process.

Democracy has been described as “nothing more than mob rule were 51% of the people may take away the rights of the other 49%.” And democracy at its worst can be that if you simply play it by the numbers.

Our fifth principle is encouraging us to do more than that. We also affirm the right of conscience. We are supposed to think about what we believe in, what we value, what we will do and how we will vote. Our conscience will move us to actually show up and vote - but again it is more than simply numbers.

We value a system where no one person is in charge. Our historical roots live deep within the radical notion that each one of our congregations is self-sustaining and each sets their own course. And is founded on the truly radical notion that each one of our members is equal in vote to any other member.

I came in to the Unitarian Universalist world from the United Church of Christ. For those not familiar with the UCC they are really our cousins. Both denominations find their roots in the early Congregationalist churches of New England. But at a certain point in our history some went the direction of being Unitarian and some went the direction of being Trinitarian.

But the Congregationalist structure remained. I do think however that the Unitarian Universalists have kept a more orthodox understanding of congregations being the main unit - the power base.

When I first started being a UU and learning about its history and about other congregations I learned that many congregations have in their bylaws requirements for voting – requirements to participate in the democratic process. You must sign the membership book; you must make a donation of record - meaning it is more than putting cash in the plate - which we

quite appreciate by the way. But in order to vote you actually have to have your name connected to the donation it cannot anonymous. Usually a congregation's bylaws will state that you have to be a member for a minimum amount of time before you can vote - usually it is something like 4-6 weeks. And you must vote in person; you cannot email that one in.

I must admit that I was first confused by the need for all these rules about membership. IN the UCC I have never seen anyone sign a membership book. And I was raised Catholic once baptized you are pretty much in for life. One clergy friend of mine explained to me that it was important to keep an even playing field in a contentious vote. You wouldn't want one side packing in extra votes. My first reaction to that was "Really packing in extra votes y'all must think that you are pretty special if you are worried about people packing in extra votes. In this day and age I would think we should be way more worried about how to attract folks rather than prevent folks.

But I actually think, even though there are a few instances of people trying to skew a vote that the explanation I received was not quite on target. I think that congregations over time have learned that there really can be a bit of the mob rule if 51% of the folk get to tell 49% of the folk what to do.

So setting some requirement in order to vote is an essential way of saying all are welcome here but if you want to have a voice in our future then there are some things that you must do.

Our own constitution lays out our rules:

Section 1) Affiliation with this Society is open to all.

An active member is

A) Any person at least 16 years of age who affirms and supports the principles of Unitarian Universalism and the Purposes, Mission, and Covenant of this Society

B) Active Membership shall be initiated when an individual affixes his or her signature in the Society's Membership Book.

Voting privileges become effective thirty (30) days after the Membership

Book is signed.

C) This Society shall formally recognize membership.

So to become a member and live out our fifth principle you have to make a commitment

And with that comes some rights

- Voting privileges
- Services of union, child dedications, memorials
- Eligible to be a committee chair, officer or elected Trustee
- Eligible to serve as a voting delegate at denominational meetings

And some responsibilities

- Participation in the programs and activities of the society
- Financial support through a contribution of record in the past 12 months - unless you have received a confidential waiver
- Affirm and support the Principles of the Unitarian Universalism and the Purpose and Mission and covenant of the Society.

We make it clear that it is not simply about signing the book or giving money. We recognize that there are times and situations in people's lives when giving money is not possible. What we really want is for our members and our friends to participate. We want our members and friends to know that serving as a chair or as an officer is important. We want our members and friends to understand that the rituals around transitions unions - births - deaths are important. We want our members and friends to understand that being a delegate - representing our congregation within our larger denomination is important. Ours is a faith where we have to show up.

As a non-profit without an annual meeting we would grind to a halt - we are actually legally required to have at least one meeting of our membership annually. But that is only the legal requirement. We recognize that this congregation determines its future. We recognize that it is important to

review the past year by sharing reports from the different parts of our congregation. We recognize that the finances need to be transparent in that the members of this congregation get financial reports and can vote the budget either up or down.

Those are the nuts and bolts of our democratic process but the spirit of it is in the right of conscience. Our principles call us to think about what we believe, what we value and where we want our society to be going. There are no encyclicals only us. That is a lot of responsibility.

And we take that responsibility seriously. Because of that we talk - a lot. I like to assume best intentions of the people I meet. So I believe that we do all this talking as a way to educate ourselves. After all we are committed to our principles and so we want our best conscience to rise to the top. This also means that we sometimes, or maybe often, get really committed to what we believe and we start to argue.

There are jokes about UUs and our love for the argument. You may have heard this one before "A visitor on a tour of heaven noticed a group of UUs who were arguing about whether they were really there or not." Or this one - "a group of UU children were in their Sunday school class and were trying to determine the sex of a rabbit. "There's only one way to decide," said one child "lets take a vote on it."

But this arguing is not unique to UU folk. The story that Tina told this morning is taken from a folktale from the Philippines. Paul writing to one of the early Christian churches counsels them that all the different roles of ministry have value - teacher, preacher, elder, deacon, counselor all had equal value.

There was a joke I heard once that echoes this but it is really not pulpit appropriate. Turns out it was based on an Aesop's fable - One fine day it occurred to the Members of the Body that they were doing all the work and the Belly was having all the food. So they held a meeting, and after a long discussion, decided to strike until the Belly consented to take

its proper share of the work. So for a day or two, the Hands refused to take the food, the Mouth refused to receive it and the Teeth had no work to do. But after a day or two the members began to find that they themselves were not in a very active condition: The Hands could hardly move, and the Mouth was all parched and dry, while the Legs were unable to support the rest. So thus they found that even the Belly in its dull quiet way was doing necessary work for the Body, and that all must work together or the Body will not be well."

We UUs are passionate about our beliefs and so we should be and we are free to passionate even encouraged to be. But how we live out that passion is important - how we communicate not simply what we communicate to others is important.

If we allow our other principles to inform how we live out our democratic process I think it will tell us about how we also can be using our conscience in a good and responsible way. An article put out by the office of communications of the UUA offers some ideas around how our principles can inform our disagreements.

In the spirit of our first principle we need to dialogue with respect. "Avoid using language that undermines another person's dignity. Name-calling and sarcasm can quickly turn respectful disagreements into personal attacks"

In the spirit of our second principle we need to show compassion in our discussions

"Try to allow each person a fair opportunity to voice his or her perspective. Shouting (whether in ALL CAPS text or verbally), interrupting, and—in online discussions—flooding message venues with your comments in an attempt to drown out other voices are all behaviors that undermine this important principle."

In the spirit of our third principle we need to encourage each other in

spiritual growth

"Keep in mind that debate and discussion should be a productive venture; a respectful exchange of ideas helps each of us learn as we continue our spiritual journeys"

In the spirit of our fourth principle we need to remember that we each get to engage in a responsible search for truth and meaning

"Remain open to ideas and perspectives that are different from your own."

In the spirit of our fifth principle:

"Democracy works best when all people are welcome to participate fully in the process"

In the spirit of the sixth principle we seek peace liberty and justice for all. Does what you are saying and how you are saying measure up to this

In the spirit of our seventh Principle we respect the web of existence of which we are all a part.

"Our words affect not only the person to whom we're speaking, but anyone who hears or reads our comments, and their attitudes and actions toward others"

(Above quotes taken

from <http://www.uua.org/communications/199425.shtml> )

Our congregation depends on a diversity of beliefs and so we must welcome a diversity of viewpoints we must be in dialogue with one another and remember to value all not simply those that we agree with.

I don't believe that arguing divisively is a requirement of our congregation - no matter what our reputation as a denomination is. I do think that fair and respectful dialogue is a spiritual practice that serves all. I do believe we must all work together or this community will not be well. It is in our roots, it is what makes ours a unique faith with a message that the larger world so desperately needs. That message "Democracy led by conscience and

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shaped by respect.

In a world without end let this be so.