

Dancing the Sixth Principle

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By Sabrina Kirby

Two famous quotations kept coming to mind as I wrote today's sermon about the Sixth Principle of Unitarian Universalism. The first is from Mahatma Gandhi: "Be the change you want to see in the world." The second is from the early 20th century feminist and anarchist Emma Goldman: "If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution." Both quotations have been appearing on posters and T-shirts for decades. And as it turns out, there's no documented evidence that Gandhi or Goldman ever wrote or uttered those sentences. And it seemed fitting to be inspired by two excellent things nobody ever said as I wrote about what I think of as the impossible principle: "The goal of world community, with peace, liberty, and justice for all." In fact, it's tempting to say to you now, "Be the change you want to see. That's all I've got. Let's have a potluck." But as a member of the Seekers RGL group, which agreed to present a sermon about one of our seven UU principles each month this year, I feel a responsibility to explain why I think the sixth principle is impossible; why I think we need to work toward this goal, anyway, and what dancing has to do with it. And I should explain why we are proceeding backward through the principles.

So many of us in the Seekers class felt drawn to the Seventh Principle, “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part,” that we decided to start with that one, so it could be a sort of lens for looking at the others. Many of you were here when Chris opened our series on Sept. 15 with a sermon on the 7th Principle called “Turning the Principles Upside Down.”

Somehow, I ended up with number 6: “The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.” Not my favorite. It’s not that I don’t think world community is a worthy goal. In fact, the 7th principle affirms that we are already part of a community of all beings. The 6th simply urges us to wake up to this truth and embrace the goal of helping the whole world do the same. But the “peace, liberty, and justice for all” part seems so lofty; so unreachable, given the divisions that persist in the world. Every time I open a newspaper I’m reminded of a line from Shakespeare’s *Two Gentlemen of Verona* that a professor placed at the top of an exam I took in 1977: “What fresh hell is this?” Only now I’m not amused. People in power seem bent on creating a hell on earth, and as Ann noted last week, they don’t need demons to help them do it.

According to the UNHCR, there are already 70.8 million forcibly displaced persons in the world today—almost one tenth of the world’s population. Under the heading “Emergencies” on the UNHCR web site, a horrifying menu drops down: “Burundi situation. DR Congo emergency. Europe situation. Nigeria emergency. South Sudan emergency. Venezuela situation. Central African Republic situation. Displacement in Central America. Iraq emergency. Rohingya emergency. Syria emergency. Yemen emergency.” And we are only beginning to see the unmistakable impacts of global climate change on human as well as non-human populations. What will we do as the oceans keep rising? As the forests burn? As the croplands wash away, blow away, and give out? How will we achieve the goal of world community then?

I read the 6th principle and find it hard not to despair.

The goal of world community seems even more remote when we see people in our own country responding to change by retreating into tribalism and fear. I understand that reaction. We have a hardwired instinct to protect our families and to be wary of outsiders, as Lois noted in her sermon a few weeks ago. Maybe that’s why every major

religion has a tradition of hospitality that teaches us to welcome the stranger. **I want to remind us today that we already have the teachings and traditions we need to help our beloved, interconnected community of all beings to survive—in fact, to thrive, insofar as the changing climate allows—with peace, liberty and justice for all.**

When I searched for sermons about the Sixth Principle I could share with you, I was surprised to find very few. The ones I did find encouraged people to be the change they want to see, one way or another, and a common theme was **radical hospitality**—a willingness to welcome the other, to respect difference, to step outside our comfort zone, to make ourselves vulnerable, as Cassie encouraged in her sermon a while back. As emergencies and migrations continue, and they will, radical hospitality will be required to enlarge our communities peacefully and with justice, to allow humans and other creatures to cross borders, to welcome and share even when we feel threatened, to work together to solve old problems and new ones. Radical hospitality will encompass all of our UU principles: To welcome all beings as having inherent worth and dignity; to practice justice, equality, and compassion; to keep searching for meaning that will sustain us.

I think the training ground for radical hospitality is everyday hospitality, but even that doesn't always come naturally or feel easy. When I started considering what helps me to experience hospitality and gain the confidence—I might even say faith—to practice it, I realized that there's almost always some ritual or structure involved. For example, church, at its best, invites us in and gives us a role to play. For me at UUCSV, learning to make coffee, clean the kitchen, greet visitors, or even serve as worship associate gives me opportunities to practice different forms of hospitality. The instructions for these activities are like training wheels for my wobbly hospitality bike, with countless kind UUs nearby to spot me.

Maybe because I'm an introvert, my most profound experiences of hospitality and inclusion have come through ritualized practices that don't involve speech, or at least don't depend on it: practices such as silent meditation with others. Work practice and meal preparation during silent retreats. Any kind of work side-by-side with other people. I'd include our yard sale—working together on a common goal can be a deeply satisfying, profoundly **welcoming** experience that, in turn, helps welcome others. For some people, sports teams function this way...and I realize it's a short step from sports to the military, another institution

with rituals that enable people to do things they wouldn't do otherwise. I believe peaceful ritual is equally powerful.

But the ritual I really want to talk about is New England contra dancing.

How many have tried contra dancing? There was a dance last night in Lewisburg, and I'm sorry I can't time-travel us back there to witness what I'm about to describe:

It's a partner dance, but the custom is to change partners for every dance. Couples form a long line, with "ladies" on the right and "gents" on the left. Here I should explain that contra dancing in the 21st century is gender fluid: anyone can dance the role of a gent or a lady. And because there's a lot of spinning, twirling and other movements that are more fun in a swirly skirt, people don't necessarily dress to match the gender they were assigned at birth.

In this long line, the couples pair up into groups of four: 2 gents and 2 ladies. Prompted by a caller, these pairs of couples interact in a series of dance figures that take them one time through a tune that the band

will repeat multiple times. So to illustrate, imagine when we sing our principles to the tune of do-re-mi; during principle one, we might swing with our partner for a count of 8; on principle two, we might do-si-do around the other couple; and so forth. When we get to the end of the song, the couples will have traded places, so that each couple faces a new couple when the song starts again. In this way, the couples proceed along the line in opposite directions—which is why it's called contra dancing. When you get to the end of the line as a couple, you wait out one time through the tune and then rejoin the line, proceeding in the opposite direction.

If this sounds confusing to you, imagine how it feels to dance it for the first time—when you don't know what to expect, don't know anyone, and maybe have a little bit of social anxiety. My first time contra dancing was in a large echo-y hall, with at least a hundred dancers. Not very far into the dance, I lost track of my partner and fled. It's likely that different wandering, confused people kept being grabbed to fill my place until that dance ended. Or maybe the whole line of dance collapsed—I had no idea. I figured I was done. But a kind woman invited me to be her partner for the next dance. That dance somehow went better, and ten years later, I was helping to organize a monthly

dance in Lewisburg, and attending or playing music for dances from Harrisburg to Wilkes-Barre.

What I gradually discovered was that contra dancing was all about building community: between partners and among all the dancers in the line. The whole thing could fall apart at any moment, and every dancer knows that, so it becomes everyone's shared responsibility to keep the dance going. Much depends on the caller, who has to prompt the dancers at the right time, with prompts that are neither too difficult nor too easy for the particular group. But sooner or later in each dance, the caller stops calling, and the dance proceeds from memory.

Contra dancing may have been the first setting where I had a profound, bodily experience of being a stranger and being warmly welcomed. I soon learned from the other dancers that being a good partner requires empathy and respect. Every dancer's first task is to **pay attention** to their partner, such that the two of you can dance together in a way that both of you enjoy, even if you have different levels of experience. The same goes for each couple that you dance with as you progress up and down the line. There will be people who enjoy swinging really fast, and people who prefer to swing by taking sixteen beats to walk around in a circle instead. You learn to notice difference and take it in stride,

literally. You make mistakes, and so do others. You smile and keep going, in a way that helps the dance keep going as well. One caller I know has the motto, “When you stumble, make it part of the dance.” In each dance you will interact with and touch every other dancer. Some will be people you know, and some will be strangers. As you interact with each person, through eye contact, facial expression, touch, gesture, pace, and “giving weight,” you have an opportunity to welcome every new partner and co-create a dance that is both respectful and joyous.

Every sixty-four beats, you and your partner get to make a new dance relationship with a new couple. **And this is key:** Experienced dancers typically partner with new dancers, easing their way into the dance.

So what do I learn and practice while contra dancing? Many of the same skills I’ve learned and practiced in retreats and am still learning here. Smile. Pay attention. Listen. Watch. Adjust. Anticipate.

Remember. Keep moving. Make mistakes. Don’t give up. It’s not about me. Encourage others. Welcome newcomers. People will help you. The music will carry you. Contra dance is not rocket science, but in its wordless interaction it’s a powerful set of training wheels for radical

hospitality. It's also, as someone said, an amusement park ride we make ourselves.

New England contra dance actually has a dark past in this country. It was brought to this continent by white European colonizers. George Washington loved to contra dance. Henry Ford was a big promoter of contra dancing in Michigan because he wanted to use it as a counterweight to jazz culture; in other words, as tool of white supremacy. In rural areas, you'll still find almost exclusively white people at these dances, though in cities and college towns the dances are more diverse. As I mentioned, it's built around traditional gender roles. And it's not fully inclusive: If you can walk, you can contra; if you use a wheel chair, or can't hear the cues, it's hard to see how it could work. But I use contra dance here only as an example: as one way I, a non-dancing introvert, learned to face some fears, extend my boundaries, be welcomed, and eventually welcome others, supported by ritual, music, and touch. There are countless other ritual interactions that allow us to engage across difference, or could. Is there something you already do or can try that will let you participate alongside people who may not be just like you, in a spirit of peace, justice, and equality? Most people need training for being with difference; I certainly do. Maybe a good place to start is in settings where we can use existing rituals to interact, to work together, to listen, to learn to trust. We

won't change the world at first. We might only change ourselves. But in being the change we want to see, as Sara demonstrated last week, we may bring others along in an amazing dance.

May it be so.