

Staying Relevant: Evolve or Die
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UU Congregation of the Susquehanna Valley
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The process of life is expansive and full of wonder. There is nothing about us which is stagnant. We live each day in an unfolding universe that is dynamic, not static.

We have a choice, of course, as to how we respond to this dynamic unfolding: we can embrace the adventure with a sense of wonder and exploration, or we can behave as William F. Buckley once described:

“A conservative is someone who stands athwart history, yelling ‘stop,’ at a time when no one is inclined to do so or have much patience with those who so urge it.”

If we are to truly understand ourselves as a living faith, we must also embrace the changes that an unfolding universe of truth and wonder provides. There is so much more to learn, so much more truth to explore.

Much of that learning and emerging truth is bound to challenge our long-held understandings of things, which will cause us some mental, emotional, and spiritual discomfort.

I invite you to think about progress in our commonly held understanding of LGBTQIA+ persons. Forty years ago, everyone was called gay, and bisexuals were viewed with suspicion. Transgender people were not even considered part of the community. As time progressed, bi folks became less threatening to the larger community, lesbian separatism became a thing, and then returned to the larger fold of the ever-expanding alphabet group. Gay rights became Gay and Lesbian rights, then LGB, then LBGT, and the letters keep going. Young people are exploring and claiming language to describe themselves ever younger and in more diverse ways than ever before. Thirty years ago, we had no understanding of a non-binary gender. We had no concept of asexuality.

When we first heard those thoughts and ideas, many resisted. That's too weird, too foreign, too unfamiliar. They're going to make the rest of us (who have assimilated into heteronormative culture) look bad. They're going to jeopardize all we've worked so hard to gain.

And yet, here we are.

It was uncomfortable, and it was painful, but now we understand that gender and sexual identity is far more complex than a binary 0 or 1 formula.

Humans are amazing creatures: always adjusting and shifting and growing and learning and surviving. Always moving and exploring and seeking new truths.

We understand ourselves to be critical thinkers. We are reasonable. We appreciate the scientific method of testing new ideas. We adjust our understanding of things when we have new information, yes? Right, I thought so.

We are familiar with our seven principles, yes?

They are on all our stuff. They're in the hymnals. They're on all our pamphlets. They're on those handy wallet cards.

For many of us, they are quite concrete to our understanding of our unitarian universalist faith.

They are very nearly ... *a creed*.

Which is a real problem for a faith that claims to be a living faith, rejecting creeds and doctrine for continued learning and development.

We are so committed to being a *living faith*, that we built into our denominational by-laws a clause that requires the periodic examination of Article II of those bylaws to see if they need revision to reflect our vision in the present world. It is required that we examine Article II – which is where the seven principles and six sources are located – every 15 years.

There were changes to Article II proposed to the General Assembly back in 2010, but they failed to garner support from a majority of the delegates present. This was frustrating to the members of the commission who had done a great deal of work, but beyond the frustration of the commission members, that refusal by General Assembly delegates to update our language has been a grave disservice to our living tradition.

Because now we have a whole generation of people who have known no language other than the Seven Principles, rendering them ... doctrinal.

The language has become too holy to challenge, too holy to change. You know, like a creed.

I want to share with you a short video created at the beginning of the process of the current Article II Commission. Let's watch together for a couple minutes.

VIDEO HERE

The Article II Commission's recommendations were released this year, and as when any kind of change is offered to a large group of people, there has been a wide variety of responses to these proposed changes. The most important thing to remember about these proposed changes is that they are all rooted together at the central point of LOVE

INSERT ARTICLE II GRAPHIC SLIDE

The proposed language for Article II, and efforts in recent years to include an 8th principle call on us to recognize systems of oppression and white supremacy both within and without our own organization, and work to dismantle those systems so that all may have the experience of a truly liberatory faith.

Sometimes, the work of self-examination and transformation asks us to do some challenging, even frightening things.

None of us likes to examine ourselves this closely and report on what we find. None of us wants to take a close look at what we believe and see that it is rooted in injustice. None of us wants to be ashamed or embarrassed to realize that what we have believed for so long has been a farce.

None of us wants to learn that we may have been doing harm while thinking we were doing the right thing.

We all get a little queasy riding up the incline of a bridge that does not offer a clear vision of our safe landing. It takes a degree of faith to do that, and we struggle with the concept of faith.

It is with some trepidation that I offer you this next bit of information.

There is a movement afoot within Unitarian Universalism that seeks to roll back a lot of the progress we have seen in the past decade. There is a movement that believes that there exists some kind of deep state cabal of woke activists, determined to eliminate old white men in favor of young queer women of color.

It is no coincidence that they use this kind of language when the sole nominee for UUA president is Rev. Dr. Sofia Bettancourt, who happens to be under 50 years of age, queer, and a woman of color.

As a people who prefer not to engage in actual conflict with one another, the pushback is being framed in ways that offer plausible deniability. There are arguments about specific language, syntax, punctuation. It should be mentioned that many of these folks are the ones who argued so vociferously against changing “men and women” to “people” in the traditions a few years ago.

Arguing about grammar and other technical minutia is a sabotage tactic recommended in the CIA Simple Sabotage Field Manual created in 1944 on how to infiltrate and undermine groups deemed “dangerous” to US political interests.

In the introduction of that slim tome, the CIA describes physical sabotage like slashed tires, fouling gas lines, and damaging electrical infrastructure, but also the following:

A second type of simple sabotage requires no destructive tools whatsoever and produces physical damage, if any, by highly indirect means. It is based on universal opportunities to make faulty decisions, to adopt a noncooperative attitude, and to induce others to follow suit. Making a faulty decision may be simply a matter of placing tools in one spot instead of another. A non-cooperative attitude may involve nothing more than creating an unpleasant situation among one's fellow workers, engaging in bickerings, or displaying surliness and stupidity.

This type of activity, sometimes referred to as the "human element," is frequently responsible for accidents, delays, and general obstruction even under normal conditions. The potential saboteur should discover what types of faulty decisions and the operations are *normally* found in this kind of work and should then devise his sabotage so as to enlarge that "margin for error."

I am not suggesting that those who resist progress in Unitarian Universalism are CIA operatives seeking to dismantle our faith.

These are members of our faith who would rather like to freeze it in a particular place in time, as Buckley described, "standing athwart history, shouting 'stop.'"

But here's the thing. Impact trumps intent.

And the impact of their actions results in damage to the living part of our living faith – the part that requires us to continue to explore and evolve and wonder and learn. They are attempting to bind the growth and expansion of our faith, and in doing so are starving it like a potted plant stuck for too long in a pot that once fit but has become too small.

The Article II commission worked to create a system that uplifts the voices of those parts of Unitarian Universalism that have for too long been excluded.

We understand that diversity makes for a richer, more well-rounded, smarter, more beautiful society. It makes for better science, it makes for better art, it makes for better governance. It makes for a better world.

And how do we achieve that? We have to give weighted consideration to the input of those groups that have been historically marginalized, excluded, and targeted.

And democracy, the way we have been practicing it, leaves no room for that to happen. When the majority rules, well, the majority rules. And the needs of the minorities, those members of our world and our denomination whose wisdom and creativity we need so desperately to experience, are left out.

What does it mean for us to examine one of the seven principles that we have turned into a creed, and acknowledge that it works at complete cross-purposes to our claimed goal of creating a world of peace with freedom and justice for all?

There are voices proclaiming that the draft language represents a power grab from the overly “woke” cabal in UUA leadership. Sound familiar?

Can we just stop for a moment and name that language?

When it happens in politics, we can identify it as authoritarianism. When it happens in our denomination, we balk at naming that same behavior. We are seeing the tactics and goals of a group of people determined to maintain control of a culture that is changing around them, even as their own numbers represent an ever-shrinking minority.

They are operating on fear, much as those in our political world are tapping into the fear of change in our larger culture.

There are some who fear that their own voices, which have been dominant for so many years, might not carry the weight and authority they once did.

Its almost as if they believe that being outvoted might feel unfair. They very clearly do not want for themselves the reality of minority status they have been so comfortable inflicting upon others for decades.

I say, and I believe this to be true, that we who enjoy so much privilege, and so much power, would do well to shut up and listen for a bit. We have been running things for so long at the cost of what might have been.

As people of privilege, it is our obligation to tear down the systems that unfairly favor us and exclude others. We must eliminate the systems that grant us access to opportunity and resources at the expense of others.

“Democratic process,” is not limited to one practice. Any process that acts in consult and consent of the governed is democratic. We can re-think how we do this.

The words in our bylaws were put there by us, and we can move them around. When we know better, we do better. That’s what it means to be a *living tradition*. As we learn, we progress, and change our behavior.

Change is always challenging. If it was easy, we’d do it more often.

It can be terrifying to acknowledge that we might be benefitting from a system that is inherently unfair AND not of our making.

Driving over that bridge into the unknown can cause anxiety.

But if we want to grow, if we want to reclaim our relevance, we must become through actions the living faith we claim to be.

We can do it. Remember, as human beings, we are designed for exploration and growth.

The language changes through the years, but if love is at the center of the process, we will make it through.

May this be our practice and our prayer.

Amen.