**Searching for Free and Responsible**

Delivered at Skagit UU Fellowship on September 11, 2022, by Joseph Bednarik

Among the countless words written and published, whispered and chanted, yodeled and sung over the course of human history… Among the shredded papers, deleted files, bonfires fueled by banned books, and censorship both active and passive, here are twenty words—in English—for your consideration this fine Sunday morning:

“Language is courage: the ability to conceive a thought, to speak it, and by doing so to make it true.”

Those words were composed by a writer of great imagination and courage, and as we enter a sermon entitled “Searching for Free and Responsible,” we would do well to listen once again to Salman Rushdie, a sentence from his novel *The Satanic Verses:*

“Language is courage: the ability to conceive a thought, to speak it, and by doing so to make it true.”

[…long silence…]

Do you hear that?

*That*… is what some religious and political fundamentalists have been trying to do to Salman Rushdie for decades.

And with Salman Rushdie brutally attacked at Chautauqua Institution—a legendary retreat center that practices deep inquiry and free thinking—on the stage in the Hall of Philosophy—we speak aloud Rushdie’s words—“language is courage”—inside *this* room called “sanctuary.”

“Philosophy” means love of knowledge and wisdom.

“Sanctuary” is the most sacred part of a religious building *and* a place of refuge and protection.

The lecture Salman Rushdie was about to deliver was on the theme “More Than Shelter, and according to local press accounts, the topics to be discussed included “the United States as a place for asylum for writers and other artists in exile and as a home for freedom of creative expression.”

*This* pulpit, 3000 miles from Chautauqua Institution, in a small town at the base of a mountain range and near the edge of a continent, is called a “Free Pulpit.”

*This* congregation—the Skagit Unitarian Universalist Fellowship—courageously grants, to whomever speaks from this pulpit, freedom to say what they will, to speak their truth. To think and feel and articulate what they will. To give voice to ideas that may crack your heart open; that may enliven your spirit; that may stir forgotten perhaps painful memories; or inspire you to consider difficult or beautiful or confounding ideas.

At this very moment, each person present here is co-creating a living, breathing, vibrant sanctuary where freedom of thought and freedom of expression is called forth, and I want to assure you that I respect your creation, and will do my best to responsibly honor your trust.

And I wonder aloud whether anyone at Chautauqua Institution was instructed to remove the bloodstains of a great writer off the wooden stage in the Hall of Philosophy.

Whether someone with a galvanized bucket of warm water and a scrub brush worked up a lather and the soapy water turned from sudsy white to murky pink… or whether, upon deeper consideration, the leadership allowed Rushdie’s blood to seep deep in, to stain the floorboards. To keep this stain, this random shape, as a testament and reminder.

If it were my choice, I would keep the stain.

I would invite the world’s finest photographers to record the stain in a variety of lights and angles, to publish the images of the stain on the internet for all to see, and to print posters and postcards and t-shirts to send to every library, every house of worship, every statehouse and school and city hall, and the caption would read:

“Language is courage: the ability to conceive a thought, to speak it, and by doing so to make it true.”

Starting here, at this free pulpit co-created in a room called “sanctuary,” we human beings—whose hearts are pumping our own warm blood—and who practice this liberal religion called Unitarian Universalism, have much work to do in this world.

So let’s bring the generous attention and fierce commitment of our pumping hearts and lively minds to the Fourth principle of Unitarian Universalism:

“A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”

For those of you who are new to UU—or for those who need a quick briefing—Unitarian Universalism is a liberal religion that is, by design, *creedless*. At its most basic, the word “creedless” simply means that nobody involved in this religion—at any level—will hand you a list of precepts and say, “Here—this is the creed. If you want to be part of our ‘we,’ you need to believe these words.”

That said, in Unitarian Universalism, we *do* share seven principles that frame the structure of the religion and provide guidance for our behavior in the world.

The seven principles are not the words of a Divine creator, like the Koran of Islam, or the Ten Commandments of the Hebrew Bible; they were not spoken by a Messiah and recorded by disciples like the Christian Gospels; they are not like the discourses of the Buddha, nor are they “sacred” in a traditional religious sense.

They are good ideas—good, *working* ideas—composed and constructed and enacted by human beings.

These ideas are made of words, they are made of language.

These ideas did not exist before human beings imagined the ideas… and within cosmic time—as our sun moves towards dying and evaporates the water on our gorgeous blue planet—the seven principles of Unitarian Universalism will also evaporate, because there will be no more human beings to think and imagine.

Sometimes in Mount Vernon we sound like French Existentialists, *n’est pas?*

So take heart: Currently, between the nothing of “before human consciousness and imagination were around” and the nothing of “a billion years from now our sun explodes,” we have each other, meeting in this sanctuary, affirming and promoting and calling into being seven principles of a liberal religion.

*We* are the religion.

*We* put the religion into motion and make it manifest in the world.

This is a good way to spend a portion of your life’s energy, and to help build a just and joyous society!

The lack of divine authorship for the seven principles of Unitarian Universalism is in no way a diminishment of the principles.

Quite the opposite, in fact.

Like the Bach cello suites or the Tacoma Narrows Bridge, a cultivated garden or a skillfully constructed quilt, the principles are *made* things. Made by human beings. And they are made to be functional *and* beautiful; they are made to work and nourish and inspire human engagement in a complicated and complex human society, that seems to become more complicated and more complex with every passing news cycle.

The Seven Principles are also made to work together. The principles come as a package deal, and their strength lies within the interplay amongst and between, in the push and the pull, in any creative tensions that may arise. In other words, it’s fudging a bit if you cherry-pick one or two principles and ignore the others.

If you find yourself dismissing or ignoring a certain principle, it would be a constructive and nutritious exercise to explore *why* you feel no love for this one or that one.

And while we’re not going to read through all the principles this morning, when you have some spare time this week, you are invited to review the principles and read through them—they are readily available online or on wallet cards like this.

[Note: The Seven Principles are included in the “Sources” section

at the end of this transcript.]

Read through them slowly and admire their elegance and brevity. Read them one to seven, and then seven to one. Imagine how human society would function if these principles served as the blueprint *for* society. Or, more humbly, even in Mount Vernon! Humbler yet, our own lives inside our own homes!

And while the principles exist as an interworking and interconnected set of seven, it is also a helpful exercise to occasionally meditate on *single* principles, to try and understand what the words are *actually* saying.

What *you* believe the words to mean. How *you* bring the principle to life.

Not to play favorites, but one of my go-to principles is number four.

Sure, the First Principle is the marquee principle that sets everything up—“the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” This idea is a gorgeous and necessary reminder that even the person who cut you off in traffic or the internet troll who stole your identity is a sublime miracle made of stardust, and that they, too, are a fellow human being pumping warm blood, who contains worth and dignity.

That said, it doesn’t take too much imagination to get uncomfortable with the First Principle, to plop it down in front of an extreme example to see how well it holds up.

More than once, after a sermon discussing the First Principle, congregants have come up to me and said “*Really?*” Then they rattle off a short list of evildoers and ask—with an *edge* to their voice—“What about *these* guys?”

Or after today’s sermon, it is fair to ask, “What about the young man who shoved a sharp blade into Salman Rushdie’s neck in front of an audience in a place called the ‘Hall of Philosophy.’ Show me the worth. Show me the dignity. Even his Mom has disavowed him.”

Not infrequently, worth and dignity can be difficult to detect, *especially* in the extreme. I get it…

And yet, speaking for myself, I function better in a world believing that human consciousness has “worth and dignity,” that all human beings are worthy of respect, and that an individual’s human consciousness is rare and holy and precious and temporal. And that there are people who enact evil, who misuse and abuse their precious gift.

That there are powerful forces within society—racism, fundamentalist capitalism and fundamentalist religion to name three—that can blur or bury or blunt an individual’s and group’s “worth and dignity.”

As we implied earlier, human society is a constructed thing. We make it up. As such, we are responsible for helping maintain and *improve* it. Difficult as it can be to defend in the extreme, I choose to believe and practice—as a default setting—that every person’s consciousness is Divine, is rare, and part of my religious practice is to recognize the Divine in every person—*especially* when it’s not obvious.

Hate to break it to you, but religion may be best practiced when and where the world does not make sense.

And then of course the concluding principle, number seven, that calls us to have “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence”—aka the entirety of the known Universe—“of which we are a part.”

Between those two poles—from each and every inherently worthy person of Principle One to the interdependent web of all existence in Principle Seven, we find number four, the *middle* principle.

Consider the structure that literally makes “search” the bullseye: Three principles before, three principles after; and then the word “search” is the exact middle word in a nine-word sentence—four words before, four words after.

Whether random or not, whether intentional or not, the word “search” is the absolute center of our seven principles: the middle point or fulcrum between teeter and totter, between the individual human and the interconnected web of all existence.

It is a very short word, a single syllable—“search”—that serves as both a noun and a verb.

* I search my search.
* You search your search.
* We search our search.

And what is the goal of my, your, and our search?

The principle states it plainly: “truth and meaning.”

*How* shall we search?

Once again, the principle makes it plain: “free and responsible.”

Pardon the expression, but… but… *“Holy Crap!”* Are you kidding me? That sounds like a *lifetime* of work. Just hand me a creed, for Heaven’s sake!

Hate to break it to you but practicing Unitarian Universalism ain’t that easy.

Again, Unitarian Universalism offers no sacred texts authored by a Divine Being. There are no easy outs by saying, “I guess it’s God’s will.” All we have is each other, and our brains and hearts and hands, and our integrity and best intentions. And, of course, our search.

As Reverend Paige Getty says, from the book *The Seven Principles in Word and Worship:* “As a faith tradition, Unitarian Universalism makes sacred the right and responsibility to engage in [a] free and responsible quest as an act of religious devotion. Institutionally, we have left open the questions of what truth and meaning are, acknowledging that mindful people will, in every age, discover new insights.”

I love that she describes the search as an “act of religious devotion” and reminds us that “mindful people will, in every age, discover new insights.”

Truth be told, we humans have *always* been searching for truth and meaning and insight. Twenty-five hundred years ago, Socrates was hanging out in Athens, eager to dialogue with just about anyone about truth and meaning, love, justice, friendship, state power, virtue, et cetera.

Topics that can be simultaneously crystal clear *and* murky. Ideas that can have radically varied expressions and understandings in different cultures.

As you likely know, Socrates was considered the wisest of all human beings for one simple reason: He *knew* that he didn’t know. He kept asking questions. As Socrates says in the dialogue entitled “The Apology”: “If I am the wisest man alive, it is for I know one thing, and that is that I know nothing.”

What I hear in that sentence, from one of the intellectual taproots of Western society, is: search.

And thus Socrates tried to find someone wiser than he—that was his *search*—and would discuss with anyone who cared to try and articulate—through human language—the *essence* of deeply held human concerns such as justice and love and friendship and power.

We’re *still* talking about these subjects.

And in Socrates’s case, his search led to his execution by the State, on charges of impiety and corrupting the youth.

Beware: Searching and seeking and philosophizing can be as dangerous as it is fulfilling.

With Socrates in mind, with Salman Rushdie recovering from his injuries, and with Rushdie’s attacker presumed innocent until proven guilty, we close with a quote from the President of Chautauqua Institution:

“We also saw something else today that I hope we never forget. We saw some of the best of humanity… people who ran *toward* danger. I saw Chautauquans who are doctors and nurses rush to provide selfless care, literally holding Salman Rushdie together until the ambulance arrived.”

May we all, when called, become the best of humanity.

We certainly practiced this morning, by actively co-creating a free pulpit and co-creating a place called “sanctuary.”

Let’s savor our sweet good fortune that our free and responsible search brought us right here, right now. And that our search—the absolute center of this faith tradition—continues responsibly, continues freely.

Amen

**Searching for Free and Responsible**

As Unitarian Universalists, our Fourth Principle calls us to “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” While this sounds noble and just, what does “free and responsible” look like when put into practice—especially within our current environment of partisan politics, so-called “culture wars,” media silos, and passionate calls for social justice. This Sunday we gather, in a place called “sanctuary,” to search together—freely and responsibly.

**SOURCES**

The Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism:

1st Principle: The inherent worth and dignity of every person;

2nd Principle: Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;

3rd Principle: Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;

4th Principle: A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;

5th Principle: The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;

6th Principle: The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;

7th Principle: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

[8th Principle: There is a current discussion among Unitarian Universalists about adding an eighth principle, focused on dismantling “racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.” For more information visit [www.8thprincipleuu.org](http://www.8thprincipleuu.org)]

More information on the Principles and Sources can be found here:

https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles

*The Post-Journal,* Jamestown, New York, various front-page articles from August 13-15, 2022:

* “Salman Rushdie Attacked Before Giving Chautauqua Address Friday,” by staff/wire
* “Chautauqua President Addresses Future,” by Gregory Bacon
* “Hochul: We Will Stand With Courage,” by Michael Zabrodsky

Personal Note: During my young teenage years, I worked as a paperboy, delivering *The Post-Journal*. Chautauqua Institution was a short drive from my hometown.

Ellen Brandenburg (ed.), *The Seven Principles in Word and Worship* (UUA, 2007).

“The Moral Roots of Liberals and Conservatives,” Jonathan Haidt, TED Talk, February 2008:

https://www.ted.com/talks/jonathan\_haidt\_the\_moral\_roots\_of\_liberals\_and\_conservatives/transcript