

“IN QUEST OF ‘LIVING RELIGION’”

Skagit Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

March 19, 2023

Speaker: Rev. Bruce Bode

Celebrant: Rosemary Stevens

Music: Sally Riggers

Media: George Rogers-Clark

Introducing New Members: Linda Kuller

Quotes for slide prior to service

“Religion is one’s way of valuing most comprehensively and intensively.”

(Frederick Ferre, *Basic Modern Philosophy of Religion*, p. 69)

“Religion is that core of ultimate meanings, values, and convictions to which we commit our lives.” (Richard S. Gilbert, *Building Your Own Theology, Volume I, Introduction*. p. xiii)

“Life has taught me this: every day is new, and if anything is true, all that matters when we’re through is how we love.” (Beth Nielsen Chapman, from her song “How We Love”)

“If we agree in love, there is no disagreement that can do us any injury, but if we do not, no other agreement can do us any good. Let us endeavor to keep the unity of the spirit in the bonds of peace.” (Hosea Ballou, 1771-1852, Universalist minister)

Greeting, introduction of service theme, reading of Article II of the UUA Bylaws

Greetings to all of you, both to those of you here in the sanctuary and to those of you tuning in virtually.

This religious community, the Skagit Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, is a member congregation of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. And this morning I thought that I, as a retired Unitarian Universalist minister, would address the questions of “What is religion?” and “How does a religious organization like ours approach religion?”

By way of introduction to these questions, I’d like to start us out by reading through Article II of the current bylaws of our Unitarian Universalist Association because here is where we, at the associational level, attempt to give written expression to our approach to religion.

Whereas the approach of most religious organizations is found in creedal and confessional statements or statements of faith, our approach – rather unusually, even oddly – is found in the bylaws of our Unitarian Universalist Association, particularly in Article II of these bylaws. It’s here where we try to explain in written form, both to ourselves and to others, the way we understand and approach religion.

The main reason I'm taking you through this exercise today is because these Article II bylaws of our Association are currently under review at the associational level. Such a review is mandated in our bylaws at least every fifteen years. (See Article XV, Section C-15.1.) The current formulation of these Article II bylaws has been in place since 1985, with but a couple of changes. (George, could you, please, bring up the first slide.)

Unitarian Universalist Association: Bylaws and Rules

Article II Principles and Purposes

Section C-2.1. Principles.

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:

- * The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- * Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- * Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations
- * A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- * The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- * The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all;
- * Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

[NOTE: These affirmations are popularly known in our circles as the "Seven Principles." What follows next what is known among us as the "Six Sources."]

The living tradition which we share draws from many sources:

- * Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- * Words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love;
- * Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- * Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves; [slide]
- * Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;
- * Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature. [NOTE: This "sixth source" was added in 1995.]

Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.

COMMENT: These are the sections of the Article II bylaws that may be known to many of you. In my sermon today, I will be addressing the recommended changes to these “Seven Principles” and “Six Sources” by the current Article II Study Commission, but I’d also like to quickly read through the rest of the Article II bylaws, as these are also under review, though I won’t have time to address changes to these sections of the bylaws.”

Section C-2.2. Purposes.

The Unitarian Universalist Association shall devote its resources to and exercise its corporate powers for religious, educational and humanitarian purposes. The primary purpose of the Association is to serve the needs of its member congregations, organize new congregations, extend and strengthen Unitarian Universalist institutions and implement its principles.

Section C-2.3. Inclusion.

Systems of power, privilege, and oppression have traditionally created barriers for persons and groups with particular identities, ages, abilities, and histories. We pledge to replace such barriers with ever-widening circles of solidarity and mutual respect. We strive to be an association of congregations that truly welcome all persons and commit to structuring congregational and associational life in ways that empower and enhance everyone’s participation. [NOTE: This section of Article II was adjusted in the UUA General Assembly in 2013.]

Section C-2.4. Freedom of Belief.

Nothing herein shall be deemed to infringe upon the individual freedom of belief which is inherent in the Universalist and Unitarian heritages or to conflict with any statement of purpose, covenant, or bond of union used by any congregation unless such is used as a creedal test.

COMMENT: This is the current Article II of our Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations bylaws. Later, in the sermon portion of this service, we will see that the suggested revisions of our bylaws by those commissioned to review them will recommend putting transformative Love at the center of our religion. Our Opening Hymn titled “Love Will Guide Us” speaks to that approach.

Opening Hymn #131 – “Love Will Guide Us” – Sally Rogers, words; traditional music, arr. by Betty A. Wylder

1. Love will guide us, peace has tried us,
hope inside us will lead the way
on the road from greed to giving.
Love will guide us through the hard night.

2. If you cannot sing like angels,
if you cannot speak before thousands,
you can give from deep within you.
You can change the world with your love.

3. Love will guide us, peace has tried us,
hope inside us will lead the way
on the road from greed to giving.
Love will guide us through the hard night.

Reading

My reading for this service is a remarkable statement from the Dalai Lama in which he draws a distinction between what he terms “true religion” and what may be called “organized or institutional religion.”

I’m always struck by this statement of the Dalai Lama, because here’s the leader of Tibetan Buddhism saying directly that it’s not Buddhism that is ultimately important for him but the value of kindness, which he terms his “true religion.”

Now, presumably, the Dalai Lama’s Buddhist religion helps him with the practice of kindness; but the point I take from this reading is that one’s institutional religion is properly that of servant not master. In other words, one’s organized or institutional religion is intended to support and assist one in embodying and living out the values and aspirations of one’s “true religion.”

“Kindness Is My True Religion”

Kindness is my true religion. No matter whether you are learned or not, whether you believe in the next life or not, whether you believe in God or Buddha or some other religion or not, in day-to-day life you must be a kind person. When you are motivated by kindness, it doesn’t matter whether you are a lawyer, a politician, an administrator, a worker, or an engineer: whatever your profession or field, deep down you are a kind person.

Love, compassion, and tolerance are necessities, not luxuries. Without them, humanity cannot survive. If you have a particular faith or religion, that is good. But you can survive without it if you have love, compassion, and tolerance. Deep down we must have real affection for each other, a clear realization or recognition of our shared human status.

At the same time, we must openly accept all ideologies and systems as a means of solving humanity's problems. One country, one nation, one ideology, one system, is not sufficient. It is helpful to have a variety of different approaches on the basis of the deep feeling of the basic sameness of humanity; we can then make a joint effort to solve the problems of the whole of humankind.

Every major religion has similar ideas of love, the same goal of benefiting humanity through spiritual practice, and the same effect of making its followers into better human beings. All religions teach moral precepts for perfecting the functions of mind, body, and speech. All teach us not to lie or steal or take others’ lives. All religions can learn from one another; their ultimate goal is to produce better human beings who will be more tolerant, more compassionate, and less selfish. (Tenzin Gyatso, The XIVth Dalai Lama)

Meditative Song

The music for our time of meditation is a song of – and from – the heart. It's by the country and pop composer/singer Beth Nielson Chapman titled "How We Love." In this song, I see an implicit recognition of the truth that *ultimately* we all belong to one another, and that what counts in the end, what counts all along, is that we try to demonstrate this truth in acts of lovingkindness. The photos in the video you will see are selected by the artist herself. "How We Love," by Beth Nielson Chapman.

"How We Love" by Beth Nielsen Chapman

Life has taught me this: every day is new, and if anything is true, all that matters when we're through is how we love.

Faced with what we lack, some things fall apart, but from the ashes new dreams start; all that matters to the heart is how we love.

How we love, how we love. From the smallest act of kindness in a word, a smile, a touch;

In spite of our mistakes chances come again;

If we lose or if we win, all that matters in the end is how we love.

How we love, how we love. I will not forget your kindness when I needed it so much.

Sometimes we forget, trying to be so strong, in this world of right and wrong, all that matters when we're gone, all that mattered all along, all we have that carries on is how we love.

Sermon: "IN QUEST OF 'LIVING RELIGION'"

Introduction: Humans as a "religious species"

I operate with the understanding that we humans are a "religious species" in that we are a species who ask what may be called the "religious questions."

Released from sheer instinct through the evolutionary development of the neo-cortex of our brains, we humans are those creatures who are forced to question the meaning of our lives in the face of the knowledge of our death. We humans are those creatures who, looking up at the stars in both wonder and worry, are compelled to ask:

Who are we in this vast universe in which we find ourselves, and what sense, if any, are we to make of it?

What meaning, what purpose, may be ascribed to our lives, and how should we live our lives? What *ought* we to be about?

To what or to whom should we ultimately devote ourselves, and what is worthy of our devotion?

What inspires our deepest reverence, and what is worthy of our deepest reverence?

These, I would say, are some of the quintessential questions that describe the “religious enterprise,” and in this sense we humans are a “religious species;” in this sense, we are *all* “religious.”

One’s actual or “true religion”

And one’s religion, then – that is, one’s actual religion, not just one’s professed or institutional religion, but one’s “true religion,” as the Dalai Lama puts it – is one’s response to these “religious questions.”

“Religion,” writes philosopher of religion Frederick Ferre, “is one’s way of *valuing* most comprehensively and intensively.” (Frederick Ferre, *Basic Modern Philosophy of Religion*, p. 69)

In other words, whatever it is that you value most comprehensively and intensively, that is your religion!

- ... whether or not you have a name for it,
- ... whether or not it is systematically thought out,
- ... whether or not it is related with a particular concept of God,
- ... whether or not it is connected to a given religious organization or institution.

Why religious organizations exist

Still, religious organizations like ours, at base, come into being as attempts to address the fundamental questions of our being, our ultimate concerns, and what it is that we do value – and ought to value – “most comprehensively and intensively.”

The struggle of religious organizations for relevancy in our modern world

Obviously, not everyone belongs to such religious organizations or finds them helpful in regard to their “religious quest” – particularly in our modern world.

Increasingly, religious organizations – ours included – struggle to be relevant in the modern world in relation to the “religious quest.”

And part of the attempt to be relevant as a Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations is to review the statements on our approach to religion at least every fifteen years.

So, now, I'd like to look with you at the current attempt in our Unitarian Universalist circles to give verbal and written expression to our approach to religion – our quest for “living religion” in this first part of the 21st century.

Comments on our bylaws by Article II Study Commission

I'd like to begin by reading some comments of those commissioned to study Article II of our bylaws, the bylaws that I read near the beginning of the service. There are nine persons on this Study Commission, who have been working diligently for a period of over two years.

Also, near the beginning of our service, I mentioned that it's unusual, even odd, for one's stated approach to religion to be found in the bylaws of the organization. And this is what the Article II Study Commission reviewing the bylaws also found. On pages 13 and 14 of their Report, the Study Commission writes:

“Our Approach”

Article II Study Report, pp. 13-14

We started our work together developing trust and understanding in our relationships, something we felt mandatory for success in this two-year-long, intensive process. We reviewed our charge and the scope of our work, learned about the history of Article II and analyzed its functions and purpose.

The main functions of this article in our bylaws are legal and organizational. It defines who we are in a legal sense, and sets up the parameters of the UUA as an organization. In that first phase of the process, it became clear to us that in addition to these main functions [the legal and organizational], which are required of any bylaws, there were many other functions that UUs expected it to fulfill. These include:

- * Theological: helps us articulate our shared values and theology
- * Social: serves as a shared cultural touchstone
- * Educational: lists concepts to teach and sources to draw from
- * Personal: serves as a personal code of ethics
- * Evangelical: a way to explain to others who we are and draw their interest
- * Rhetorical: used in public situations to define our beliefs or morality in legal or political contexts

This is a different set of functions than many organizations expect from their bylaws. We suspect that because we do not have a creed or a confession of faith, which other religions rely on to fill these roles, these functions have fallen to Article II as the closest analogy because it is a shared agreement between congregations and we have a congregational polity. [That is, each congregation within our Unitarian Universalist Association governs itself, sets up its own membership requirements, etc.]

Recommendation by Article II Study Commission for changes to “Seven Principles”

I don't have time to take you through all of the Committee's proposed changes to Article II ... but let me take you through the proposed changes to what have been known as the “Seven Principles” and the “Six Sources” ... as this is where the greatest obvious changes are proposed, and as these sections of our current bylaws are the most well-known in our congregations (and which will likely bring forward to the most commentary and conversation). So, here is a slide of the current principles, known as the “Seven Principles,” which we saw earlier in the service.

Section C-2.1. Principles.

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:

- * The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- * Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- * Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- * A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- * The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- * The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all;
- * Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Our next slide is a proposal for changes to Article II by a previous Article II Study Commission, as follows:

Section C-2.3 Principles.

(Proposed by Article II Study from 2009, not adopted)

Grateful for the gift of life, we commit ourselves as member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association to embody together the transforming power of love as we covenant to honor and uphold:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement of spiritual growth;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of democratic processes;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Reverence for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

This proposal came before the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations in 2009, held in Salt Lake City. The recommended changes to these “Seven Principles” by that Study Commission consists of a different introduction, the shortening of principles three and five, and the substitution of the word “Reverence” for “Respect” in Principle #7. It was not passed on a very close vote – I was there!

But these are relatively very slight changes, as you will now see when we take a look at the proposed changes to the “Seven Principles” by the present Article II Study Committee, which begins with this introduction:

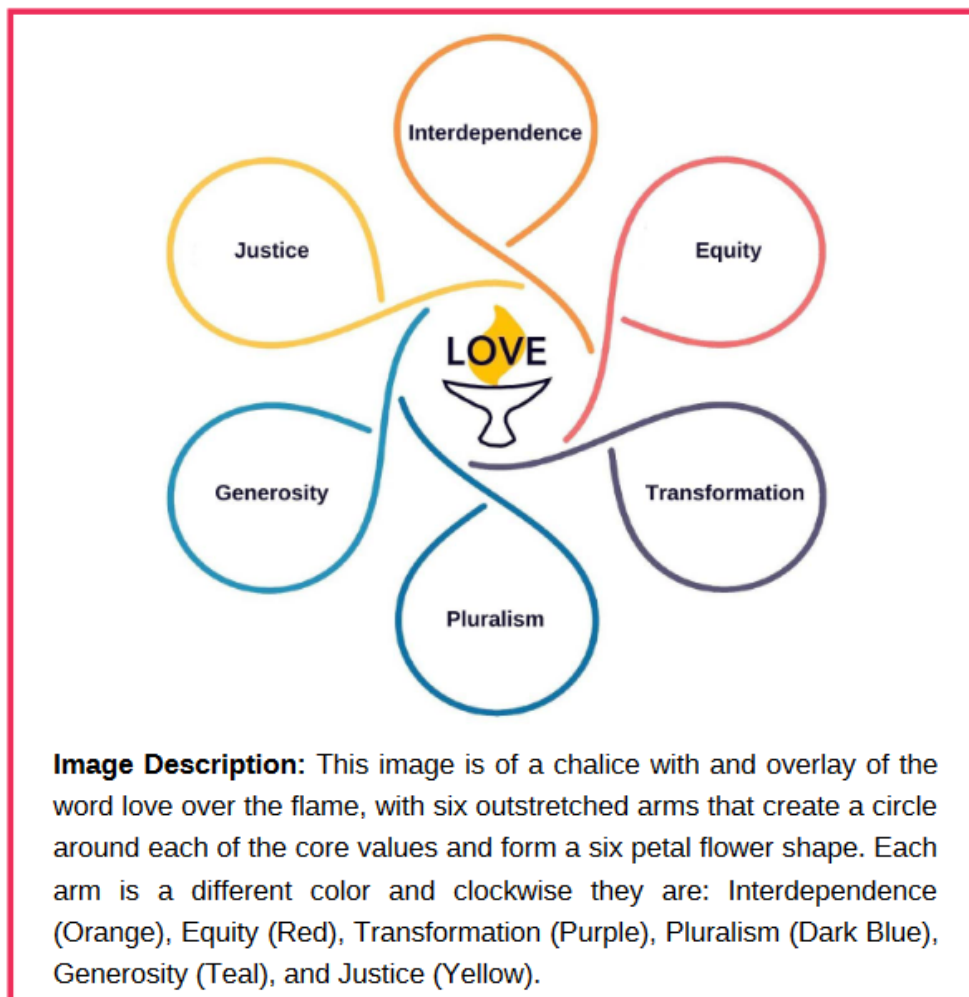
Section C-2.2. Values and Covenant.

As Unitarian Universalists, we covenant, congregation-to-congregation and through our association, to support and assist one another in our ministries. We draw from our heritages of freedom, reason, hope, and courage, building on the foundation of love.

Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values. We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of Love.

Inseparable from one another, these shared values are:

Here, “Principles” has been changed to “Values and Covenant,” with Love placed “at the center of our shared values.” These seven values, which the Commission finds represent Unitarian Universalist members’ approach to religion, are, then, depicted in this image:



Let me read the description of that image on this slide:

Image Description: This image is of a chalice with an overlay [not “and overlay” – hope someone catches that typo] of the word love over the flame, with six outstretched arms that create a circle around each of the core values and form a six petal flower shape. Each arm is a different color and clockwise they are: Interdependence (Orange), Equity (Red), Transformation (Purple), Pluralism (Dark Blue), Generosity (Teal), and Justice (Yellow).

What follows next in these proposed changes to Article II are the naming of the six core values surrounding the central value of Love, with a brief one-sentence description of each value, followed by one or two sentences of covenantal resolve and aspiration to live out these values. These statements draw in various ways from the Principles of our current Article II. Let me read these to you:

Interdependence. We honor the interdependent web of all existence.

We covenant to cherish Earth and all beings by creating and nurturing relationships of care and respect. With humility and reverence, we acknowledge our place in the great web of life, and we work to repair harm and damaged relationships.

Pluralism. We celebrate that we are all sacred beings diverse in culture, experience, and theology.

We covenant to learn from one another in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We embrace our differences and commonalities with Love, curiosity, and respect.

Justice. We work to be diverse multicultural Beloved Communities where all thrive.

We covenant to dismantle racism and all forms of systemic oppression. We support the use of inclusive democratic processes to make decisions.

Transformation. We adapt to the changing world.

We covenant to collectively transform and grow spiritually and ethically. Openness to change is fundamental to our Unitarian and Universalist heritages, never complete and never perfect.

Generosity. We cultivate a spirit of gratitude and hope.

We covenant to freely and compassionately share our faith, presence, and resources. Our generosity connects us to one another in relationships of interdependence and mutuality.

Equity. We declare that every person has the right to flourish with inherent dignity and worthiness.

We covenant to use our time, wisdom, attention, and money to build and sustain fully accessible and inclusive communities.

Comments on proposed changes to Principles

So, these are the proposed changes to what is currently the section of our Bylaws on “Principles.” And three quick, personal, evaluative comments:

1) First, I like the emphasis on “values.” Religion, following the definition of Frederick Ferre, has to do with what one *values* most comprehensively and intensely.

2) Secondly, I also like putting “love” as the central value, the “heart” value, you might say. A concern or qualifier, however, with the use of the English word “love” is that “love,” as the popular song from the 1950’s goes, is “a many-splendored thing” and susceptible of multiple meanings. Perhaps, the various values around the center-fire of Love in the image qualify the type of love of which we speak. Personally, I would like to add the “kindness” of which the Dalai Lama speaks in the reading I gave you, to make it “lovingkindness.”

3) Thirdly, I do have some concern with how “covenant” will be interpreted and implemented. I agree that our approach to religion is “covenantal” not “creedal.” And so long as “covenant” primarily expresses values to which to aspire, I’m okay. But all too quickly “covenants,” as I’ve seen during my ministerial career, get legal and contentious ... with one person accusing another person of being “out of covenant” ... and, of course, the other person responding with, “No, you’re out of covenant” ... and, now, were off to the races ... with the “lovingkindness” at the heart of religion shattered.

Recommendation by Article II Study Commission for changes to “Six Sources”

Next, we turn to proposed changes by the Article II Study Commission to what has been known as the “Six Sources,” which I read at the beginning of the service. Again, I won’t read them, but just refresh your memory on them ... and point out that, interestingly, these “Sources” appear under the heading “Principles” in our current Article II bylaws. Here, again, are the “Six Sources”:

The living tradition which we share draws from many sources:

- * Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;

- * Words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love;

- * Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;

- * Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;

- * Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;

- * Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.

Earlier, in reviewing the Principles, we briefly looked at a proposal on those Principles from a previous Article II Study Commission that came before the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations in 2009 recommending some slight changes to the Principles, which, as I indicated, were not passed.

But that Commission had also recommended changes to the Sources, which were significantly different in both form and content from the bullet-pointed “Six Sources.” I’d like to read through this proposal, as I think it could be instructive for the current discussion.

First of all, note that this section *is* titled “Sources,” and interestingly, in the proposal it was presented prior to the “Principles,” with the thought that the Principles emerged from and were grounded in the Sources. This section begins with one brief paragraph summarizing the Unitarian and Universalist heritages, as follows:

Section C-2.2. Sources.

Unitarian Universalism is rooted in two religious heritages. Both are grounded on thousands of years of Jewish and Christian teachings, traditions, and experiences. The Unitarian heritage has affirmed that we need not think alike to love alike and that God is one. The Universalist heritage has preached not hell but hope and courage, and the kindness and love of God. Contemporary Unitarian Universalists have reaped the benefits of a legacy of prophetic words and deeds.

Then, follows a second paragraph listing the primary contemporary sources from which Unitarian Universalists draw inspiration:

Unitarian Universalism is not contained in any single book or creed. Its religious authority lies in the individual, nurtured and tested in the congregation and the wider world. As an evolving religion, it draws from the teachings, practices, and wisdom of the world’s religions. Humanism, earth-centered spiritual traditions, and Eastern religions have served as vital sources. Unitarian Universalism has been influenced by mysticism, theism, skepticism, naturalism, and process thought as well as feminist and liberation theologies. It is informed by direct experiences of mystery and wonder, beauty and joy. It is enriched by the creative power of the arts, the guidance of reason, and the lessons of the sciences.

Grateful for the traditions that have strengthened our own, we seek to engage cultural and religious practices in ways that call us into right relationship with all.

Personal comment

As I said, the recommendations of this Article II Study Commission were not passed in a very close vote at that General Assembly in Salt Lake City.

One thought I've had in regard to the non-passage of these recommendations is that it might have passed if the Commission had bullet-pointed their proposed new list of Sources ... as the aesthetics of the recommended change were very unappealing compared with what it was to replace ... with all the Sources loaded into one very dense paragraph!

The actual recommendation by Article II Study Commission for changes to Sources

Enough on that. So, now, what is the recommendation of the current Article II Study Commission?

Here it is! The whole of the proposed revision fits on one slide, which is titled "Inspirations" rather than "Sources." Let me read it to you.

Section C-2.3. Inspirations.

As Unitarian Universalists, we use, and are inspired by, sacred and secular understandings that help us to live into our values. We respect the histories, contexts and cultures in which they were created and are currently practiced.

These sources ground us and sustain us in ordinary, difficult, and joyous times. Grateful for the religious ancestries we inherit and the diversity which enriches our faith, we are called to ever deepen and expand our wisdom.

Explanation by Article II Study Commission regarding changes to Sources

So, that's it! This is the Article II Study Commission's proposed change to what is currently known as our "Six Sources."

As with the "Seven Principles," it's quite a radical change, basically leaving it open as a truly "universalist" field, you might say.

On page 16 of their Report, the Study Commission explains their reasoning, as follows:

With Inspirations, we are aware that many value the current list of Sources. Nothing in what we propose contradicts this list. We felt a better use of the Bylaws would be to articulate what our inspirations **do** and how we should approach any source of inspiration. We tie them explicitly to our values and to the practices of cultural respect. If people feel an official list is necessary, we would suggest a process that includes theologians, ministers, religious educators, musicians, artists/writers and laypeople.

Comments on proposed changes to the Sources

And, again, some quick, personal, evaluative comments in regard to this part of the proposal regarding what has been – and currently still is – the “Six Sources.”

Typically, religious organizations, both conservative and liberal, prescribe authoritative “sources” and “resources” for one’s religious journey – an authoritative book, doctrine, creed, messiah, prophet, leader, spiritual discipline, and so forth. These are what typically distinguish and define a given religious organization.

The challenge for most religions in our modern world is that their religious approaches tend to be *exclusive* and confining.

But the challenge for us, it seems to me, is the opposite. We tend to be so *inclusive* that we struggle to define and ground ourselves as a religion.

In our circles, for example, individuals may refer to themselves not just as “Unitarian Universalists,” but as, say, “*Buddhist* Unitarian Universalists,” or “*Christian* Unitarian Universalists,” or *Humanist* Unitarian Universalists.”

This possibility of having multiple sources of inspiration to draw upon – and, actually, I like “Inspirations” as the heading for this section, as I’ve always thought of the “Sources” as “Sources of Inspiration” – but this possibility of having multiple sources of inspiration has seemed to me to be the more distinctive part of our approach in religion, more so than our “Principles” or “Values,” which are held by many religious organizations.

Individual congregations and individuals within a given congregation, like the Skagit Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, are granted the privilege of discerning and discovering the source or sources of inspiration that work for them in their quest for “living religion.”

But what happens when the field is *completely* open?

This has been – and is – an ongoing challenge for a non-creedal, open-ended, “free faith” tradition like ours. It’s the challenge of having a centering story, a recognized ritual, and agreed-upon spiritual practices. It’s the challenge of having *a* language. (Esperanto, an invented “universal language,” has had a hard time getting traction.)

A primary function of religion and religious organizations has always been to help individuals and the societies of which they are a part to center, ground, and orient themselves in relation to our quintessential human questions, ultimate concerns, and deepest and highest values.

I, and I suspect many of you, have been – and are – drawn by the “universal” embrace in our approach to religion. And yet the “universal” is met in the “particular.” It’s in and through *particular* “Sources of Inspiration” that one orients and grounds oneself – discerns

an anchor-point, a pivot-point, a still-point, a centering-point. (A main source of inspiration for me, for example, in addressing the “religious questions” is modern poetry.)

Thus, the challenge for our religious organization – so it seems to me – is to provide particular Sources to inspire and ground us ... so that we might ourselves be awakened, vitalized, and transformed ... and from that vital place be a source of “transformation” for the world around us.

A personal, practical, principled, pastoral recommendation

So, this has been a review of part of the proposed recommendations for changes to our current Article II. And, in this regard, as a retired minister at some distance from this process, I have my own recommendation to make ... one that I regard as practical, principled, and pastoral: namely, that a way be found to preserve the current Article II, and, perhaps, even the one that did not quite get passed at the General Assembly in 2009.

Many Unitarian Universalists are deeply attached to the present statements characterizing their approach to and understanding of religion. I suggest that some way be found to honor and preserve the current statements without “deep-sixing” them, so to speak.

Create, perhaps, a subsidiary document, as actually hinted at in the Report. Let such a document be an example of, and a metaphor for, evolution and transformation. Show the evolutionary steps on the way to the present recommendation.

Both individual Unitarian Universalist congregations and individual Unitarian Universalists are at different places in their journeys and change at different rates. Honor that process.

Change is hard. Consciousness adjusts itself slowly. Many, perhaps most, of the members of our congregations are not young (some of us included).

But strictly as a practical matter, if the past can be preserved and honored, I think this proposal, which aims to embrace the present and look toward the future, will have a much better chance of passing in the upcoming General Assemblies.

Whew! Amen! So May It Be!

Closing Hymn #1057 – “Go Lifted Up” – Mortimer B. Barron, words & music

Go lifted up,
Love bless your way,
moonlight, starlight
guide your journey
into peace
and the brightness of day.

Closing Words:

Our Closing Words of Benediction are from Dr. Rebecca Parker, the words of the song “There Is a Love”:

There is a Love holding me.
There is a Love holding all that I love.
There is a Love holding all.
I rest in that Love.

There is a Love holding us.
There is a Love holding all that we love.
There is a Love holding all.
We rest in that Love.

(Words of Dr. Rebecca Parker; music by Elizabeth Norton)

Extinguishing the Chalice

We extinguish this flame,
But not the Light of Truth,
The Warmth of Community,
The Fire of Commitment,
Or the Power of Transformation;
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the service led by the Rev. Bruce A. Bode at the Skagit Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Mt. Vernon, WA on Sunday, March 19, 2023. Rev. Bode retired as senior minister of the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Port Townsend, WA in June 2018, and is now minister emeritus.)

(NOTE #2: The Article II Study Commission Report to the UUA Board of Trustees, which was referred to in this service is 24 pages in length and can be found in its entirety at this link: <https://www.uua.org/files/2023-02/article-II-study-report-2021-23.pdf>)