

Awake to the Woeful World
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UUFM—4 24 22

Homily

Our Soul Matters theme for the month of April is “Awakening.” We continue our exploration today, gaining wisdom for our journey from the insights of priestly prophets, the words of social visionaries, and from our own experience. So, let us explore with joy and open hearts.

I imagine discussion of Earth Day and of the Eighth Principle could seem strange bedfellows to some of us. When I returned to the topic after having set it a month ago, I did ask myself “What was I thinking!?” What do climate crisis and the 8th principle have in common? It turns out—a lot. Most generally, both point to the same moral problems that our Seven Principles seek to address. Both call us to our responsibility as a faith community. Both call us to insist that this faith community and all of us who compose it address honestly and compassionately a wounded world that demands our action. “For in this time of human suffering and exaltation we are called beyond awakening into action!” “[We must] make an actual vow to hear the cries of the world, to step into the experience of awakening to the suffering of the world, and the desire to bring an end to that suffering.” “May we guide our hearts in service to a greater good that holds all living things in its holy embrace.” So, let us dig into this call. What vows have you made or still could make?

Many of you know the principles or some of them, those value statements that Unitarian Universalist Association congregations affirm and promote. Let’s review them: 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; and Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. Part of the beauty of these statements lies in how you can combine two or more of them to highlight the interconnectedness of the others. I am particularly partial to pairing the First with the Seventh—The inherent worth and dignity of every person and respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

This combination brings together the microcosm of every person, every life, with the macrocosm of the web of existence, the universe. This combination reminds me that as we imagine into existence a better world, we must imagine always at both layers. Individually, within our own hearts, we must perceive the possibilities of transformation within and move ourselves into responsibility for working toward the transformations of ourselves. We must ask ourselves—are we living in ways that honor our own profound human worth and importance? Are we examining ourselves for the views that might hold us back from relaying our human goodness to the world? Are we holding ourselves to a responsibility to live well and with dignity, as the beautiful beings that we each are? And at the same time, we must ask ourselves—are we living in ways that respect the interdependent web, acknowledging that we are not simply individuals but inextricably interconnected beings, responsible for working compassionately with

others to ensure the liveliness of the whole that holds us all? Are we thinking critically and compassionately about ourselves so that the web flourishes with equity, justice, compassion, open-heartedness, and acceptance of others, shaping our actions and behavior?

Ours is a living tradition, a tradition subject to and requiring transformation, just as we each do. It is only since 1985 that these Seven Principles were adopted by the Unitarian Universalist Association and its member congregations. And in the last decade, individuals and religious communities have tasked themselves, asking: “Do we and to what extent do we live up to these values?” And in too many ways, we find that we do not. That is painful to acknowledge. Siblings of color feel the effects of racism in our religious communities, unintended as those are. In our society, race continues to be used systematically to batter our siblings of color, to belittle their lives, to deny their human rights.

In order to strengthen our resolve to uphold the dignity and worth of every single person and our beautiful and inevitable connectedness with each other, a new principle is proposed and will be discussed at the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association in June of 2022. The 8th Principle asks us all to acknowledge that perhaps the language of the 1st and the 7th Principles has not been sufficient to hold us to account for the American sin of racism. I look at it this way, if those Principles, and the other five, if they had been sufficient to root out racism in our systems of living, including in the ways we are a religious community, well, we would not need to entertain an 8th Principle. But we haven’t rooted out racism, so we do need the 8th Principle. And it calls us to uphold and promote: “journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.”

And we do long, don’t we, for such a Beloved Community, where the worth and dignity of all people is truly realized. While the 8th Principle focusses specifically on racism, it highlights also the ways that some of us have not been considered fully a part of the whole, fully part of a whole web of all existence. If we have struggled at times to see that all human beings—beings with different life experiences and different histories and different ways of being—are part of the whole web, surely we also continue to struggle with the reality that we, all of us human beings, are, indeed, part of the web, part of nature and not apart from it.

Earth Day was initiated as a student movement back in 1970, to draw attention to the climate and planetary changes already noticeable and damaging to the web of nature. But the movement was and continues to be held back by the mindset that humans are somehow separate and above nature. As designer and futurist Bruce Mau said, “For most of the history of Western culture we have been told [that we own nature,] that we have dominion over it, that it is limitless and ours to use up as we see fit. Today, science clearly shows that none of that is true. But still this old way of thinking, which puts humans at the center of the universe and against nature, dominates our imagination. What we need is a new mindset—a shift—a new way of seeing who we are and where we are in the universe.”

We have thought of nature as a set of resources for us to use. In some ways, we imagine ourselves as conservators or managers of nature, using it in better ways, but still using it with mainly through for ourselves. In order to counteract this way of thinking, Mau argues for a design mindset, which he describes this way: “The moment that we choose to live with intention, to be deliberate about the outcomes of our way of life, we become designers. The way that we live is either random, accidental, and haphazard—or designed.” Living fully into our 7th Principle, living fully the promise of Earth Day, that requires, in Mau’s words understanding “our lives as a continuous flow of matter and energy in a never-ending cycle.” There is nothing—and no being and no human being—that is not part of the web of existence. How do we begin to imagine ourselves as partners and companions to the natural world, in harmony with the processes that literally sustain our very existence as living beings?

Now, design itself is not answer. Design is not a benign technology, any more than any technology is. The world has, indeed, been designed, in ways that profit concentrated wealth and power. The domination of our economy by the interests of a small number of the hyper-rich means that we are dependent upon fossil fuels and industrial farms that pollution land, air, and water, and pharmaceuticals that deaden us or are too expensive to aid us. A democracy becomes an autocracy when political activity is increasingly directed toward silencing particular voices. Biodiversity, including human diversity, is increasingly destroyed if it gets in the way of the concentration of power and wealth. Even design that seems justifiably good has unintended negative consequences. Vaccines for small pox and other deadly diseases designed a world that led to overpopulation. Industrial farming techniques led to bumper crops of food to feed these masses, but also poisoned the natural world, including our own bodies. The language of the Declaration of Independence asserted the equality of human beings, but the language of the Constitution upheld property rights, especially hideous as human beings were forced into the status of property.

Mau proposes that most of our problems result because we humans have placed ourselves at the center of design. And he proposes that it is life that should be at the center. All of life at the center. He writes, “When we put life at the center and understand our place in the cosmos alongside and connected with the rest of life, we come to honor and respect life with all other loving creatures. We join life. [. . .] We see our lives and everything that we produce and consume as part of the natural world—not separate from or above nature, but an expression of our natural being.” As I understand this call to put life at the center, I find that it is entirely in keeping with the 8th Principle. This Principle requires that we hold all humans as equally human. As such, race can never be a bar to being part of nature. Experiencing the web in different ways does not mean we are not all on it. All human life is life, and as such part of larger life.

What would it mean to design our society, our systems, our cultures with life, rather than humans at the center? According to Mau, “Life-centered design is a culture of caring. First for ourselves as individual citizens, then for our communities, because we cannot have a thriving individual in a toxic community, and from there we can extend our caring to the environment, because we cannot have a thriving community in a toxic ecology.” Design with thriving life at the center, that is design that includes all of our Principles, including the 8th Principle. That is a design with the planet at the center, with humans as a

conscious part of nature, human life fully knowledgeable that and fully acting as if our own health and well-being were entirely interwoven and interconnected with the thriving of the planet. Which, of course, it is.

Reflection

Design with thriving life at the center, that is design that includes all of our Principles, including the 8th Principle. That is a design with the planet at the center, with humans as a conscious part of nature, human life fully knowledgeable that and fully acting as if our own health and well-being were entirely interwoven and interconnected with the thriving of the planet. In the words of Bruce Mau, "Let's take this life-centered understanding of our place in the cosmos and experience a new way of being." This is what we are called to do.

We can change the world, using our two hands, our minds and hearts, our privilege, our intelligence, our creativity, our labor. We can and we must. We can work by design to map a path for the future we desire, with flourishing life the way, the reason, and the goal. Nothing but ourselves can stop us. For we are wholly involved in each other, wholly involuted, part and particle of each other, conscious of our place in the cosmos. This is our unique human way to be the universe, to be part of the continuum of the "All." We have capability. We have effectivity. And though we might despair, though we might find ourselves too small, we are a magnitude when we unite and work together for the good. Who are you working with? What larger organization are you part of to help design the future that you desire, even if you don't live to see the future? What actions are you taking now that you can amplify, join with other actions with the whole of life the center? Keep doing that. Keep doing what you're doing to put life at the center.

"Life is taking place in the in-between, as well as in our lofty goals. The detours and the details craft the path and make it our own. We did not make this day. But that we have the glorious pleasure to greet each moment as it unfolds." Let "the fire of commitment sets our mind and soul a blaze." Let us open to the full dignity of every human being so that together we might heal the world and take our rightful place in it. May we be so moved, as you remember, today and every day, that you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May you feel it so, may it be so, and may we say together, "Amen."

UUA Principles:

https://www.uuworld.org/articles/how-uu-principles-purposes-were-adopted?_gl=1%2A6z8u34%2A_ga%2AMjA1Mzc2NTc5MMy4xNjQwNTczMjE3%2A_ga_CN7F7RET4F%2AMTY1MDczMjY2OC40NC4xLjE2NTA3Mzl2NjguMA..

<https://www.8thprincipleuu.org/>

Thanks to the Green Sanctuary Team for suggestions to use ideas from Bruce Mau, whose work appeared in the Imagine It! Book the Team used for Study. Dennis Cramblit suggested the Bruce Mau reading and Cathi Fouchi found these informative design and ecological justice links:

Mau video - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rG3DZ4BteLc>

Post Carbon Institute – What could possibly Go Right? Kathleen Dean Moore

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CY3DRRuZsqM>

Clip from Earth's Wild Music: Celebrating life in a time of Extinction – Kathleen Dean Moore

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7iITc_uvQBw

On climate change, moral integrity and hope – Kathleen Dean Moore

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qb4pJrJsCYo>