

# «Living Our Third Principle»

Sermon by Rev. Patty Hanneman, July 12, 2009

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC

Universalists, and now Unitarian Universalists, have long held that when it comes to expressions of faith, action speak louder than words. Words have never been the ultimate expression for our beliefs. In fact, John Buerhens, a former president of the Unitarian Universalist Association once wrote, “We will not make words the test of faith, only deeds.” Yet we know that words matter. This is why we’ve written a covenant. It remind us of the central truth of who we are as a community.

This morning I wanted to talk about some of the words listed in the Unitarian Universalist covenant known as the Seven Principles. The Third Principle states that we covenant to affirm and promote “acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.” But what do we mean by “spiritual growth”?

The business of “spirituality” is a slippery one, I’ll admit. All too often “religion” and “spirituality” are seen as not even dwelling in the same pew. People will say, “Well, I’m not religious; I’m spiritual,” and that statement can make many of us who are deeply committed to a faith community such as this one, really squirm.

“I worship in God’s cathedral” my dad used to say when he preferred to drive his tractor on Sunday mornings instead of going to church.

“I don’t believe you can find spiritual truth in a church,” a woman told me recently. “You have to discover them on your own.” In other words, church is a social club, with all the foibles that come with human society, but the *real stuff*, real spiritual growth, happens in the privacy of your own mind. And yet, *and yet*, we have this Principle that asks us to covenant to accept one another and to promote one another’s spiritual growth. This Principle suggests that spiritual growth does not happen in isolation.

But what is spiritual growth? I used to think of spiritual growth as something I could do to get closer to God, as if I were Jack in *Jack and the Beanstalk*, where engaging in spiritual practice such as prayer or fasting or tithing would help me climb higher and higher on the stalk. Spiritual growth was a vertical movement; a relationship between God and me. A theologian by the name of Bernard Loomer suggests that spiritual growth has to do with the *size* of your soul. Loomer asks, “What is your soul’s ability to grow and expand, to stretch when life throws contradictions in your path.” Contradictions such as believing in a loving God while watching a young child dying from a stray bullet on the streets of Durham. How does your soul respond to something like that?

Loomer suggests that spiritual growth is not about vertical ascent to heaven but rather growth in every dimension at once. Robert Hardies, in this little book about our seven Principles,

calls it “spirituality in 3-D” so that instead of using the beanstalk metaphor, we could think of it in terms of a *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* faith. You might remember that the Grinch, poised on the top of Mount Crumpit, ready to dump the Who’s Christmas presents, pauses to listen for the weeping of the Whos down in Who-ville. And what does he hear instead? He hears them singing! At first he’s confused, and then he *gets it! He gets Christmas*. He is transformed through their singing and Dr. Suess tells us “the Grinch’s small heart grew three sizes that day.”

This is a story of true spiritual growth; 3-D spirituality; a spirituality that grows hearts and souls large enough and supple enough to embrace a more complex world than the Grinch has known before. Large enough to *accept* the ways of the Whos. To *accept* one another is the beginning of the statement that I our Third Principle.

Let’s look at the subject of spiritual growth in more concrete terms. How many of you are familiar with the work of Dr. James Fowler and his ideas about faith development? Fowler is a noted authority in the field of the psychology of religion, and in the late 1970s he developed a schematic of seven stages of faith development that I think of as spiritual growth. As we move through these various stages of faith development, our hearts are able to open a little wider. Here are Fowler’s seven stages:

The **first stage** he calls *undifferentiated faith* (and please don’t get hung up on the names of these phases!). This stage occurs in infancy. Infants form their initial impression of their faith in the world through their sensations of trust, courage, hope and love on a very primary, very physical, level. They can also experience the lack of these things which will affect their spiritual development.

The **second stage** Fowler calls *intuitive-projective faith*. This stage includes lots of fantasy and imitation and is most often seen in children from age three through seven. This is the stage where rituals become important. Children at this age can be powerfully and permanently influenced by the examples, moods, actions, and language of the primary adult in their environment. They make sense of the many new things they are experiencing by using an *imaginative* process that is not inhibited by logical thought. This is the stage of first inner awareness. Children at this stage have a special intuition, a sense of almost magical or mystical connection with the entire Universe. Those of you who have children in your lives of this age group – listen closely and you will often find that their statements are at times filled with a special wisdom and an unusual sense of vision, even though what they say doesn’t immediately seem rational or logical to grownups.

Fowler’s **third stage** is the *mythical-literal faith*, which focuses on literal meanings and the need to know exactly what happened. Symbols are now taken as one-dimensional and literal. Story becomes the major way of providing unity with the group and value to one’s experience. The shared stories of one’s family and religious community become very important. This stage is most often seen in children ages seven to early adolescence. I remember myself at this age – my Dad’s family used to gather every Sunday afternoon during thee years because my grandmother was ill with cancer from the time I was about 8 years old through the age of 13, and we would visit her

and the siblings would make plans for her care for the upcoming week. I remember sitting with all the grownups, listening to them tell stories about growing up together, and I could just never get enough of those stories! They are still an important part of who I am today. Tell your children your stories when they are at this stage! Other elements of this stage are that their world-view is based on the concept of reciprocal fairness; religious beliefs are grounded in the literal meanings of the stories they are told. It is at this stage that we begin to find adults “stuck”, continuing to operate primarily from this stage. In fact, Fowler suggests, the majority of adults operate from this perspective. These adults tend not to step back from their story to reflect on its mythology, its deeper meaning. Instead they get caught up in the drama and the detail of the story itself and consider it to be true with a capital “T”.

The **fourth stage** Fowler calls *synthetic-conventional faith*. At this stage faith provides the basis for one’s identity and outlook on life. This is a conformist stage – often first seen during adolescence but, again, it can last a lifetime. The person becomes extremely tuned in to the expectations and judgments of the religious group. Those operating from this perspective often have not developed a sure enough sense of their own self-identity to maintain a strong individual perspective on matters of faith.

An individual may move into the **fifth stage** – *individuating-reflective faith* – in which serious clashes with the authority sources that were previously valued come up and take center stage. Now the individual begins to take seriously the burden of responsibility for his own commitments, lifestyle, and beliefs. It’s a time of *de-mythologizing*, of looking closely at “what makes sense to me.” When I was a campus minister at Duke, I experienced many students at this stage – questioning, working through tensions such as how to be an individual yet part of the group; how to be of service to others while still getting your needs met; how to negotiate the tension between the relative and the absolute.

If the individual can successfully move through this stage, she is poised to reach the **sixth stage** which Fowler calls *paradoxical-consolidative faith*. Here there must be some re-working and re-claiming of one’s past. You are able to look back at the stories, symbols, and rituals of your youth to see what can be reclaimed, but from a deeper, more authentic place. I am reminded of the story of a Unitarian minister who once traveled to the Far East to study Buddhism. After year of study, he told his teacher that he wanted to become a Buddhist monk. His teacher looked at him, smiled, and said, “No, my son, you have missed the purpose of these teachings. You are a Christian. Use these teachings to be a better Christian.” This stage is alive to paradox and the truth of apparent contradictions. Yes, this is true, but the opposite is also true. So this stage strives to unify opposites in mind and experience. It is also open to viewing the truths of others more closely, even if they seem threatening to one’s own beliefs.

The **seventh** and final stage is called *Universalizing faith*. These individuals live with a felt participation in a power that unifies and transforms the world. For this reason people who truly embody this stage are often seen as subversive to the establishment and many times die at the hands of those they wish to change. These are our prophets and sages. Fowler describes these

“Univeralizers” as having a special grace that make them seem more lucid, more simple, and yet somehow more fully human than the rest of us.

I’m always a little reluctant to talk about Fowler’s seven stages of faith development because what we tend to do – what I did when I first read Fowler – was to pigeon-hole people we know into particular stages. We say, oh, that’s me, I’m a five or maybe a six. Oh, she’s only a three; that’s why we can’t see eye to eye. Well, she jut need to be more evolved! Or we can say that church over there is a stage three but most of *us* are *at least* a stage five! This kind of thinking leads to a kind of gated-community faith, where we look for other stage fives to join us.

The truth is, in each of us one of these stages may predominate at a given time in our lives; one stage may seem to resonate with you this morning. But we are all in process, and while in process, there is always slippage. I may indeed feel like a six or even a seven during my morning meditation, but later that day in an argument with my partner or in the middle of a board meeting, I’m back at stage three holding fast to the stories that gave me my world view. Or I might be in tremendous psychic pain, revisiting stage one, needing to reclaim or reconsider whether the Universe is worthy of trust.

We meet people in our faith communities all along this spectrum of stages and what we need to remember, first of all, is that according to Fowler, the majority of u live our lives at stage three most of the time. Second, we can *accept* that wherever we are at any given time, we are there because we need to be, whether because of our age or our circumstances or our history. Our covenant with one another is to encourage one another along that path, when the time is right, to grow hearts and souls large enough and supple enough to embrace a very complex world. This can’t happen in isolation; it can only happen when we rub up against other people; people who are able to live in the tension between accepting us as we are, but are willing to encourage our spiritual growth. This is living in beloved community.

We come to this church as an aggregate of individuals. We come here hurting, or joyful, or angry, or confused, and here, if we let it... here we will enter into a partnership of trust. Here, in this community, we can practice beloved community, and the transformation of spiritual growth can begin.

Because we covenant to affirm and promote acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations. May it be so. Amen.