

**First Unitarian Universalist Church**  
**Growing Our Souls: Principle 3**  
**Rev. Sandra Fees**  
**February 18, 2007**



A. Powell Davies defined religion as the opportunity to grow a soul (Our Seven Principles, Kenneth Collier). To me that is also what the third principle is about. It affirms and promotes acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth.

The question in my mind is how do we do that? What does it mean to accept others and how do we encourage each other?

Acceptance sounds a lot like our first principle of affirming the worth and dignity of every person. If we are able to recognize the goodness in human nature, we are more likely to be able to accept one another in all our differences. In this sense, acceptance is an act of hospitality and inclusion.

Historically, we have been committed to accepting others and tolerating different beliefs. In 1568, King John Sigismund signed an Edict of Religious Tolerance and Freedom of Conscience in Transylvania. Sigismund was the first and only Unitarian King. And this was the year the Unitarian movement began in Transylvania.

The Edict declared that everyone could embrace the faith and religion of their choice. This stood in stark contrast to the religious wars being waged elsewhere and the winner take all approach to faith that saw executions, excommunications, and exiles of the losers.

Francis David who was King Sigismund's court preacher said, "In this world there have always been many opinions about faith and salvation. You need not think alike to love alike" (With Purpose and Principle, Carolyn Owen-Towle).

Our acceptance of difference clearly extends to those of other faiths. This year our 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders are studying Neighboring Faiths. They have attended a Catholic Mass, a Jewish service, Friends Meeting House, and will be learning about Buddhism and other Eastern traditions. Our acceptance of difference within our congregations is just as important. Many of us came here – to Unitarian Universalism - because we wanted a place where we can be accepted for who we are and for our opinions about faith. Many who come have found they no longer feel welcome in their old congregation, denomination, or faith.

In my case, my questioning of religion made me feel unwelcome in the United Methodist Church I grew up in. When I questioned my relationship with Jesus, I wasn't met with a pat on the head and a kind word. No one told me to shut up, but they might as well have. I soon learned that I was supposed to keep my heretical views to myself. Spiritual seeking was not the right approach to religion, and my ideas were not welcome.

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So when I came to Unitarian Universalism – and I was in my thirties, I was thrilled to find a place where my beliefs were welcome. It's pretty hard to find a place, any place, where we can be accepted for who we are. But I found that, and in a religious community.

I also was at a point in my life where I wanted to explore spirituality in an intentional way. I didn't know what that meant exactly, but I knew I had a desire for something more than a purely personal spirituality. I wanted a religious community that could be a kind of university of ideas and experiences where I could study faith and spirituality with others. I wanted to grow in faith, whatever that might mean. And I wanted to be with other people who shared my moral values whether they shared my particular religious beliefs or not.

Billy and Christy Wynne were Baptists who later became what they call “questioning Christians.” They are now members of the All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, D.C. They appeared in a CNN segment, titled “The Seekers,” a few months ago. At All Souls they found what matters is the here and now versus the afterlife, deeds not creeds, and embracing tolerance.

Billy Wynne describes his experience at All Souls. He says, “One of the very special things about the service is the idea that I'm praying to my conception of a God and I know the person right next to me has a totally different conception of God. Yet we're, for whatever reason, still sharing in that worship and respecting each other's views” (“What is a Christian?”, CNN, Anderson Cooper).

So it is on any Sunday morning. We find ourselves sitting side by side with others who hold different beliefs from ours. And not only do we accept them, we think it's part of what makes our religious life together special.

Accepting someone as they are and being tolerant of different ideas does not mean we “rest on our laurels.” The Quaker Parker Palmer says acceptance and unconditional love, “surrounds us with a charged force field that makes us want to grow from the inside out – a force field that is safe enough to take the risks and endure the failures that growth requires” ([A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life](#)).

Acceptance without encouragement to spiritual growth, without that charged force field, can be quite stagnant. Being a person of faith in our tradition means being open to learning and growing together. So if acceptance means flinging our arms wide open to embrace the whole world in love as it is, encouragement means holding out a vision for what we can become.

When we encourage someone, we give them courage, confidence, and hope. It is quite a gift to offer encouragement to another person or to be the recipient of it. There are times in our lives we are ready to throw in the towel and give up and then someone comes along and treats us kindly, gently and honestly from the heart. Someone offers us their full presence.

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The practice of presence is a different kind of encouragement than what we typically encounter. All too often, we have someone telling us how to live our lives, how to solve our problems, and how to think and feel. And even how to be religious.

The practice of presence requires a gentleness and a patience. It does not try to fix things and doesn't treat a person as a problem. When someone is in deep pain, in depression, dying, when someone is in spiritual crisis, the practice of presence bears witness to that person's journey.

It was as a chaplain that I learned the practice of presence. One young mother I visited was in great physical and emotional pain. She had vascular disease and was going to have her leg amputated the next morning. When I stopped at her room, she told me about the pain she was experiencing. I asked if she'd like me to sit with her for a while.

At first, there was a part of me that wished she'd said no. It would have been much easier to flee the room than to be present to her pain. But she asked me to stay. I stayed with her for over an hour. I sat with her sometimes in silence, sometimes in conversation. It became clear that she was engaged in a spiritual struggle as well as a physical and emotional one. She told me about her struggles with her children. She told me about her dreams for the future after the surgery. Being there with her was one of the hardest things I ever had to do.

But I learned that in the graciousness of the space I offered her, she was able to share her fears and begin to dream about the future. It means giving another person enough space to allow him or her to arrive at their own insights. Accepting each other and encouraging each other means respecting each other.

The third principle calls upon us to honor the ability each of us has within our own person to grow. If we aren't too insistent, if we don't invade another person's reality, amazing things can happen. Our compassionate and loving presence can support another person's spiritual growth.

Let me share another example. In an eight-session group that Parker Palmer was facilitating for public school educators, there was a veteran high school shop teacher. The shop teacher by his own admission said he "didn't get it."

He sat in silence through six of the eight meetings. He was uncomfortable and distracted. Each time he took Palmer aside and asked "What ... is going on in there?" Each time Palmer told him that he couldn't answer that question for him.

At the seventh meeting, something had changed. The teacher shared with the group that for two years he had been locked in a struggle with his principal. The principal kept insisting that he attend a summer institute on new, high-tech methods of teaching shop. The teacher just kept saying no and getting angrier. He insisted that students need hands on experience. He'd been teaching for 20 years and felt he knew what his students needed.

A few weeks earlier the principal had again approached him to attend the summer institute. He refused again, but this time he had also told his principal:

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I've been sitting with this group of teachers who've been exploring their inner lives – and I've begun to realize that I have one, too! I can see now that I've been lying to myself, and to you, about why I won't go to the summer institute.

The truth is I'm afraid. I'm afraid I won't understand what they are saying. I'm afraid that what I do understand will make me feel like I've been teaching the wrong way for twenty years. I'm afraid I'll come home from that institute feeling like I'm over the hill. I still don't want to go, but at least I can be honest with you about why.

For a few minutes the teacher and principal sat starting at the floor. Then the principal looked at him and said, “You know what? I'm afraid, too. Let's go together” (Hidden Wholeness). And they did.

For the teacher, it was being in a safe circle that provided what he needed to take a risk. The group didn't force anything. They didn't tell him what he should or shouldn't do or be. They didn't place expectations on him. But they did continue to provide a caring presence.

Our faith community strives to be a safe circle of acceptance and encouragement and presence. We are, after all, about the business of growing souls. We do this by giving each other opportunities to try new skills – through participation in worship or committee work. We notice when people are absent from our midst or struggling in some way. We send them notes or check in to see how they are doing.

We offer a variety of opportunities for education and spiritual growth. There are circle groups, similar to what the shop teacher participated in, in which the inner life can be explored and shared. There are classes, special events, and service projects.

There are weekly worship services designed to bring spiritual nurture and encouragement. We provide these things for the children in our community too. Adults and teachers, as well as parents, have an important role to play in encouraging the spiritual lives of the children.

In this religious community, we have the very real chance to find the support and understanding that can transform our lives. We have the opportunity to be fulfilled and to grow spiritually. Here, we can find a safe circle in which we can grow our souls.

May it be so. Amen.