

Do you know the Sources?

A traveler couldn't find the local Unitarian Universalist church. After looking in the center of town, in the suburbs, and out in the surrounding countryside, the traveler asked a farmer "Am I too far out for the UU church?" The farmer's reply: "Nobody is too far out for them."

Well, if Unitarian Universalism is a non-creedal faith, what do we believe? Is it just anything goes? Is nothing too far out?

Few questions cause us as much discomfort as what to say when asked what UUs believe. After all, we don't all believe the same thing. But even as we vehemently reject any creed, we seem to be forever searching for some verbal formula about which all (or at least most) of us can say: "Yes, that's what I (more or less) believe."

So, as UUs, we acknowledge seven principles—2 more than the 5 Pillars of Islam, 3 more than Buddha's 4 noble truths, and 3 less than the 10 Christian commandments. We display these principles in our worship space. We teach the Rainbow path to our children.

But did you know that in companionship with principles, we as Unitarian Universalists also affirm and promote six Sources? They appear next to the principles at the beginning of both our hymnal and the supplement "Singing the Journey." The songs are arranged by the Sources. At our last program committee meeting, we were arguing

about how many sources there were until we discovered that the older editions of our hymnal reflect the five sources at the time it was printed and the new editions have six to reflect the addition of a sixth source in 1995. You may want to check your hymnal and see what edition you have. Keep that page handy so that you will have the text of the Sources as I go through them a little later.

Rev. Jason Shelton music director of First Unitarian Universalist Church of Nashville wrote a Sonata about the Sources in 2005. He said, "We have this marvelous statement about theological diversity in the Sources, but it largely gets ignored. Most of our folks can talk about the Principles in glowing terms. But the statement about what we believe is a statement about diversity, and that's the Sources."

I was raised as an Evangelical United Brethren which became the United Methodists, but I have been a UU over 20 years. When Sandy mentioned the Sources at a program committee meeting, I didn't know what she was talking about. Sandy was aghast. How did I not know? Well, we don't really discuss them. We don't seem to discuss that our living tradition is based on history and tradition that springs from a multitude of places, cultures, and experiences.

To remedy this lack of knowledge, the program committee has decided to use our Sources as a framework for programs this year; similar to how we discussed each of the principles through programs last year.

What are the sources? How did we come to make them a part of our faith?

Now for a little history. This is paraphrased from the UUA website. In 1960, the Unitarians and Universalists were trying to merge. It was a contentious process. They wanted to develop a statement of purpose for the new organization consolidating the Universalist Church of American and the American Unitarian Association. The statement's precise wording had been a matter of such heated debate that it nearly derailed the merger. The contention revolved around whether to include such phrases as "love to God and love to man" and a reference to "our Judeo-Christian heritage." A compromise version, including a critical change from "our" heritage to "the" heritage, was finally hammered out.

Since then, the sources have been woven into the fabric of our denominational life.

By 1981, the original statement no longer fit our needs. The language was rife with sexism and there was way too much controversy over how much we were a Christian denomination. You should read the original statement. It seems very archaic for 1960.

In 1981, work began on developing a new statement for our faith. The Principles were written and divided from the building blocks of our faith; the sources. The new document passed the General Assembly with only one dissenting vote in 1984. It passed with wide support and was adopted in 1985. It was amended in 1995 to add a sixth source and will be up for review again in 2020.

I want to provide an overview of the sources. This is meant to be an introduction, not an exhaustive discussion. I want to share with you what I learned in researching these foundations of our faith.

The first one is: 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; This first source is a big one. It asks us each of us to examine the experiences of our lives and to think about what sustains us. What gets you through the miracles and tragedies that we all experience? This is what the Transcendentalists were trying to get to. They believed that you don't need a preacher to tell you what to believe or to feel. Each of us has that power within ourselves. Emerson spoke of this transcendence when he said, "It is not what we believe, but the universal impulse to believe . . . that is the principal fact." Dr. Albert Schweitzer said, "Sometimes our light goes out but is blown into flame by an encounter with another human being. Each of us owes the deepest thanks to those who have rekindled this inner light." Our beloved community is one resource that can sustain us.

The second source: Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love;

The second source calls to mind so many brave men and women who have challenged us to make this a better world. These are the visionaries who call us to action. The list is long and I'm sure your list would be very different from mine. I think of Margaret Sanger who pushed the conventions and laws of her time to help poor women who could not afford another baby. She had a vision of women being able to make their own choices about family planning. Susan B. Anthony saw a future where women would

have the right to participate in our democracy. Martin Luther King Jr. dreamt of a world with equal justice for all and an end to discrimination and war. He said, "I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality... I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word." We need that vision so badly right now.

The third source: Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;

As we listen to sermons and programs at Prairie, we can trace many to the wisdom from the world's religions. We recently had a program on Islamic art. And the wisdom of the Buddha is always there to guide us. He said, "No one saves us but ourselves. No one can and no one may. We ourselves must walk the path." This becomes for us the principle, "A free and responsible search for truth and meaning." This source is one of the things that drew me to becoming a UU. I wanted to learn what other religions and philosophies could teach me. I remember the first RE class I taught was called "Holidays and Holy Days" and I learned about Ramadan, Purim, Diwali, and Rosh Hashanah. It was great. This is what Channing called, "our inclusive church."

The fourth source directs us to Jewish and Christian teachings. Sandy recently talked about Yom Kippur and helped us appreciate that meditative time of year which focuses on forgiveness and renewal. Sometimes, we shy away from this source because so

many of us are recovering Christians. But Jesus' teachings have much to tell us about how we should treat others in our world. We should reclaim these messages. I will never regret my early grounding in Christian stories and bible study. Those parables taught me ethics, forgiveness, and the power of unconditional love. A personal knowledge of actual Christian beliefs serves me well when I examine the words and actions of those who call themselves Christians. We should all know more about the Torah and the gospels.

Number 5: 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;

To think about this source, I went back to an original document, the first "Humanist Manifesto" from 1933. It states, "The goal of humanism is a free and universal society in which people voluntarily and intelligently cooperate for the common good." It goes even further to say, "Man is at last becoming aware that he alone is responsible for the realization of the world of his dreams . . . Wow! These ideas are part of our faith tradition! This source affirms and promotes the inclusion of secular ideas. It affirms UUs are indeed a diverse community of both the religious and those who are not. That's another reason I'm a UU. I want to belong to a community that accepts Christians, Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, and agnostics and atheists. The "Humanist Manifesto" has been revised twice; with the third issued in 2003. The third "Humanist Manifesto" professes that, "Knowledge of the world is derived by observation, experimentation, and rational analysis. . . . Science is the best method for determining this knowledge as well

as for solving problems.” So our source statement asks us to seek the counsel of reason and the rigorous testing of science. Back to the Enlightenment, visionaries sought to challenge the conventions of both religion and science. Science guided Priestley in his search for oxygen and he also opposed conventional religion. I am proud that Unitarian Universalists like facts. Unlike current trends, UUs believe that science is real and not just someone’s belief. Our ranks would be rather slim if UUs did not embrace the desire for the application of reason on our quest for truth and social justice.

The sixth source, added in 1995, is: 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.

This source recognizes the power of Earth-centered traditions and how we can relate to this spirituality. UUs include the interdependent web in the principles and so we look to Native American wisdom to teach us how to live in harmony with nature and strive to protect our Mother Earth.

According to Alison Stormwolf and Pat Wilson in their article, “Native American Wisdom and Philosophy,” “Native American wisdom is deep, profound, simple and true. It has passed the test of time. The wisdom of their elders is very pertinent to the times in which we are living.

In the words of Black Elk of the Oglala Sioux,
"The first peace, which is the most important,
is that which comes within the souls of people
when they realize their relationship, their oneness,
with the universe and all its powers,
and when they realize that at the center of the universe
dwells the Great Spirit,
and that this center is really everywhere,
it is within each of us."

Louise Erdrich, the wonderful novelist, wrote a moving piece for "The Atlantic Monthly" last December about being at the pipeline protest at Standing Rock. In it she gets to the very heart of earth-centered spirituality. She said, "Besides frostbite, what did people take away from there? This was probably the first time many non-Native people had been on a reservation, or in the presence of Native ceremonies. That's a positive. The more people understand that Native American have their own religious rituals and objects of veneration, which too many non-Native people are simply features of the landscape, the better. Understanding the natural world as more than just of resource for energy, or a recreational opportunity, or even a food resource, gives moral weight to the effort to contain catastrophic climate change. Imagine if Energy Transfer Partners planned to drill underneath Jerusalem. Of course, the company wouldn't consider such a route. Yet it would be safer than drilling beneath the Missouri River."

These are the sources and why they are an important foundation of our faith. These are the tenets on which we continue to build our living faith. Rosemary Bray McNatt said it very well in her essay in “The Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide,” “Unitarian Universalism is a non-creedal faith. . . . Whether you revere God, Goddess, nature, the human spirit, or something holy that you have no name for. . .”

Unitarian Universalism is woven from many threads, cultures, and philosophies. We choose not to limit our resources but to expand them to include all of human experience. I have shared with you what I learned and the program committee will be planning programs to discuss the sources throughout the year. At the beginning, I told you about a farmer who is directing a traveler in search of a Unitarian Universalist community. The farmer’s right, UUs are pretty far out, huh?