

## *The Change We Need*

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Change is in the air—or at least it is filling the airwaves. It's the talk of the nation. Everyone is clamoring for change these days. The public approval ratings of both the administration and the congress are in the toilet. And almost every political speech at the national level promises to bring about change.

So I thought I thought I'd turn to one of the ancient philosophical schools to try to understand change--the school that asks the question, "how many people does it take to change a light bulb?" The answer depends, of course. The Episcopalians respond with incredulity. Change? That bulb was given by my grandmother!

The fundamentalists respond, "if its God's will, the light bulb will change—if not, it won't".

Naturally, I was dying to find out the answer to how many UUs it takes to change a light bulb. The response was a thoughtful one. "We choose not to make a statement either in favor of or against the need for a light bulb. However, if in your own journey you have found that a light bulb works for you, that is fine. You are invited to write a poem or compose a modern dance about your personal relationship with your light bulb (or light source, or non-dark resource), and present it next month at our annual light bulb Sunday service, in which we will explore a number of light bulb traditions, including incandescent, fluorescent, three-way, long-life, and tinted--all of which are equally valid paths to luminescence."

Well, its fun for us Presbyterians to make fun of UUs, but the fact is that its seven principles, rooted in the world's great faith traditions are a well-spring of wisdom and guidance. They are a source for personal direction—a moral compass. But they are more than that. They are also a moral compass for our nation. So this morning I'd like to explore with you the implications of each of these principles for the future direction of our nation.

Let me say at the beginning that I can't imagine why I ever thought this could be handled in one sermon. Its a daunting task, one worthy of at least seven sermons, each focused on a single principle. But since I have just today, consider my remarks merely an aperitif as we explore what the UU's seven principles have to offer us in thinking about the change we need—the kind of change we should be working for if our nation is to reclaim its promise of liberty and justice for all, to become a force for peace, and to restore our credibility in a world that has come to distrust us.

Before we look at the seven principles, let me say a few things about change. First, some people have become cynical about the possibility of real change. We remember the promise of the dawning of the Age of Aquarius that promised harmony and understanding, only to bring us Kent State, the assassination of ML King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy. We remember the promise of previous administrations that talked about bringing peace to the world, of reaching across the aisle for the sake of better serving the people, of the end of the influence of big money in our campaigns and so many other promises—only to see the promises betrayed. How many times can we be betrayed without losing hope?

Let me reiterate what I have said before. There is a difference between realism and fatalism. Realism acknowledges the difficulties and the odds head on—but being realistic does not mean we must give up hope—any more than did Ghandi, or Mandela. Fatalism, however, is the distrust in the possibility of anything new ever being possible—what is, is and what will be, will be—so they say. So if you find yourself among the fatalists, my words may be little of interest to you today. But for the rest of us, we can hope—even though we realize that no change will be perfect or permanent. But we certainly don't have to accept the status quo, which is Latin for “the mess we're in”.

Then there is the question of what kind of change we're talking about. Is it to be reform or revolution, gradual or abrupt? Let me state up front that the kind of changes I believe the seven principles call for in some of the most important areas of our national life are revolutionary. But before you turn off your hearing aids or walk out, let me remind you that no less than Thomas Jefferson advised that in order to keep the spirit of America alive we will need a revolution every twenty years.

While most of our minds turn to violent overthrow when we hear the word revolution, that need not be the nature of a revolutionary change. Indeed, revolutionary changes are always the result of an incremental process—there is a period of questioning and critique that leads to new ideas, experimentation, and alternative thinking and practice, and finally, when a tipping point is reached, what we call revolution can occur. While violence has often accompanied revolutions, generally that is due to the resistance of the old powers that seek to maintain their hold. But violence is not necessary. Ghandi, Mandela, the election of Bolivia's president, Juan Evo Morales, all showed that you can have revolutionary change without violence. It is also what may be happening with respect to our nation's dependence upon fossil fuels, driven by concerns about global warming, increased costs, and the instability of many of the sources for this fuel. We may be approaching an energy revolution.

What a revolution entails in a shift in the power arrangements as well as the basic frame of reference for one's or a nation's self-identity. It is what Jesus meant when he said to Nicodemus that he must be born again—i.e.. his entire life needs to be transformed. How he thinks of himself, what he values, and how he conducts business were all involved in his re-birth. To speak of revolution is to call for institutions and structures to be born again—to begin from an entirely different premise and with entirely different values and goals. This is different from a coup, in which a handful of people usurp power. True

revolution involves the building—from the bottom up-- of a new way of thinking and acting, and a new way of organizing life.

Our nation stands at a crossroads. What direction will we take? The choices we make will have enormous consequences for us, our children and grandchildren, for the global community and for the planet.

That said, let's turn our attention to the seven principles and consider what each might mean in terms of the direction of our nation—particularly with respect to policies. What I am going to suggest does not exhaust the possibilities. That would take far more time than we have. These comments are preliminary but I would hope that they will stir your thinking and help you as you prepare to vote in November. Let me be clear that what I am offering today is not an endorsement of a particular candidate, though my own preference is no secret. Rather, what I hope to offer us is a set of guidelines drawn from UU principles that may clarify for what and for whom you will vote this November.

### UU Principles

***The inherent worth and dignity of every person.*** This principle has a number of policy implications that relate to the second principle dealing with justice and equity. For starters, it means that there is no fundamental distinction between natives and immigrants. Any law or practice that treats undocumented immigrants as second class is contrary to our first principle. The current practice of profiling, herding immigrants into mass incarceration, ignoring their right to habeas corpus and communication with lawyers and families, and deportation without due process all must cease. A path to citizenship must be a central part of any immigration legislation. This principle obviously also relates to the way in which people of all sexual orientations, race, nationality, age, class or gender are treated. There should be no laws that privilege one group and deny the same privileges to another—this means the right to marry for gays and lesbians, or the right for felons to vote, or the right to vote for people who are illiterate.

***Justice, equity and compassion in human relations***— I want to lift up three major policy fronts that cry out for redirection, given this principle. The first is economic. It is unconscionable that this, the richest nation on earth has a growing number of people losing their homes, choosing between food and fuel, and going without health care coverage while others earn millions and even hundreds of millions of dollars annually. Equity does not mean equality but it does mean fairness and even-handedness. If entrepreneurs and shareholders have a right to make money by taking risks (and they do), workers have a right to a living wage. The current push for a raise of the minimum wage to \$10 an hour in 2010 may be a step in the right direction but it is only half of the \$20 per hour that a family of four in Maine needs in 2008 in order to have one breadwinner and a stay at home parent who can care for the children. In order to achieve anything close to this equity, there will need to be a major shift in taxation from lower and middle income persons to the wealthy, a closing of many loopholes, and some form of incentives that will assist businesses to move in this direction. If we can bailout major investment banks with taxpayers money, we can certainly recreate our system of wealth distribution.

The second area that justice, equity and compassion demand is the way in which we deal with crime. This nation imprisons 1 out of every 100 adults—by far the highest incarceration rate in the world. It is breaking our backs financially and it is failing to address the needs of victims, rehabilitate offenders or make our communities safer. We need policies that reflect the principles and philosophy of Restorative Justice, which places compassion at its center—a compassion for the healing of all—offender, victim and community alike.

A third area is health care. Over 45 million Americans are without health care coverage. Justice, equity and compassion demand that we have a health care system that provides affordable, equal quality coverage for everyone. This will mean either a nationalized system or much greater regulation. As Michael Moore says, this is not the socializing of medical care, it is the Christianizing of it.

I have spent a good deal of time on this principle, since justice is mentioned in both the second and sixth principles and seems to be at the heart of Unitarian/Universalism.

The next two principles speak primarily to the ways in which congregations need to function. But even here there are implications for the larger national direction.

***Acceptance of One Another and Encouragement to Spiritual Growth.*** Acceptance demands that our national policies recognize and celebrate our differences. The legalization of gay marriage by several states and NY State's recent decision to recognize the marriage of same sex couples that have been performed in other states is a move in that direction.

There are many sources of spiritual growth in addition to those associated with religion. Encouragement to spiritual growth suggests that there be greater federal funding for the sources of our spiritual deepening--the arts, public radio and TV, and education.

***A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.*** This principle also goes beyond that which we do within our congregation. It demands that we expand transparency in government and free our political deliberations and decisions from the power of lobbyists. We cannot have a free search for truth so long as the search is controlled by those who wish not for truth but for the expansion of their privilege.

***The right of conscience and the democratic process.*** It is not unpatriotic to criticize or resist. We need greater protection for whistleblowers even flag burners. And if each citizen is to be free to engage in the democratic process then everyone should have equal access to information and everyone's voice should be heard. This means greater regulation over the media and restoring some of the limitations related to market saturation ownership. We must end the control of the media by a few huge corporations.

***World community with peace liberty and justice for all.*** We must move beyond an approach to conflict that casts matters as a battle between good and evil. Compassion dictates that we seek understanding rather than victory—care for all who have a stake, not merely our own national interest and place of privilege in the world. It is not weakness to negotiate—it is peace-seeking. Seeking peace means using restorative justice principles in international relations: dialogue rather than unilateral and pre-emptive military action

This is the second mention of justice in the principles, this time in connection with world community. One of the policy implications of this principle is that the U.S. should significantly increase its foreign aid. We should be challenged by Norway, whose percentage of GNP for foreign aid exceeds ours by over ten times. Of all the so-called developed nations, we come out 27<sup>th</sup>—near the bottom—in the percentage we give and much of that is for arms. This principle also demands greater support for and reliance upon international agencies such as the UN and the International Court of Justice

Finally, ***Respect for the interdependent web of all existence.*** We are not only our brother and sister's keepers, we are also related at core of our beings to all that is. Harm to one is harm to all; harm to any part of the planet is harm to all of us. When we understand that we are part of an indivisibility unity with the universe, then exploitation gives way to a concern for sustainability. The policy implications of this are that we seek to end global warming and reduce our nation's energy footprint by investing in alternative energy, by setting nationwide standards for industry and transportation: that we seek to preserve endangered species and open space; and that we put an end to rapacious exploitation of the land and water.

Even those of us who agree on these principles may find ourselves in disagreement as to how to carry them out. Even if we were to all agree on how to carry them out, the way ahead will still be rough going. The powers that be will not give up without a struggle. But we should never let the difficulty of speaking truth and acting with integrity cause us to give up. The road to justice, equity and peace may be difficult but in the end, it is the only road worth traveling.