

Acceptance and Spiritual Growth

Rev. Mark Hayes

October 15, 2006

“We . . . covenant to affirm and promote: Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.” That is the third of our seven Unitarian Universalist principles, and the topic of today’s service. As many of you know, this is part of a series of services that will explore each of the principles between now and about the end of January. Incidentally, as another indication that ours is a “Living” tradition, the Unitarian Universalist Association’s Commission on Appraisal is beginning an association-wide review of the principles, and is convening a two-hour hearing at All Souls Church in Washington, DC next Saturday to start that process.

But now, back to this week’s principle. Acceptance of one another, and encouragement to spiritual growth. It almost seems as if these are two separate ideas, each deserving of its own spot in the list of principles. So why are they linked into one? Well, it has become clear to me that it’s no accident. And so, before I look at each of these components separately, let me lay out right up front what I see as an important connection between the two.

Acceptance of one another means that who each of us is, is okay. We are embraced and affirmed for exactly who we are. We don’t need to pretend we are something else. But do we want to become complacent and stagnant in our being? Or do we want to continue to grow and evolve intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually? I think most of us do. And where better to be encouraged in our spiritual growth than in our religious community.

So the idea is that you are accepted for who you are, and for where you are on your spiritual path. But you are also encouraged to continue on that path, to become even more of who and what you want to be. One very important point is that the spiritual growth we encourage is an open-ended thing. There’s not some rigid, well-defined point that we’re all expected to reach by following a specifically prescribed path. But we are all expected to keep on moving in the directions in which we feel drawn or compelled. As writer Brenda Shaffer puts it: “Growth means becoming more of who we already are, not what others want us to be. Growth means evolving and waking up, not remaining asleep in the illusion of the learned self.” So the acceptance we offer to one another is not the acceptance of who you are as a finished product, but rather acceptance of who you are at this moment as a work-in-progress.

Before I move on, I’d like to mention one more way of looking at the complementary relationship between acceptance and spiritual growth. While acceptance is based on who we are - our being - spiritual growth has more to do with movement - with doing. Bayard Rustin expressed it like this:

The major aspect of the struggle within is determined without. If one gets out and begins to defend one’s rights and the rights of others, spiritual growth takes place. One becomes in the process of doing, in the purifying process of action. The proof that one truly believes is in the action.

Most of the rest of what I have to say this morning will be focused on spiritual growth, but I do want to say a little bit more about the nature and importance of acceptance. Many people in our world find a lack of acceptance in many areas of their lives, including in some religious communities. It may be because of physical attributes such as skin color or disability.

It may be because of sexual orientation or gender expression. It may be because of nationality or accent. It may be because of lack of education or economic status.

Whatever the reason, not feeling accepted is a painful burden. It can deaden the soul. It can make you question your own worthiness. On the other hand, having lived with that pain, walking into a new place and feeling a palpable sense of acceptance – feeling embraced – can be a powerful and transformative experience. Probably one of the best ways of cultivating a spirit of acceptance is to put ourselves in the place of the other. To imagine the difference in our own quality of experience – and in our own attitude – generated by either being accepted or not. And I want you to know that *you*, in this congregation, have made that kind of difference in many lives. I encourage you to continue cultivating that spirit and to cast its net in ever-wider arcs of compassion and inclusiveness.

The last point I want to make explicitly about acceptance has to do with its limits. Just how accepting do we have to be? As the Rev. Carolyn Owen-Towle writes in her essay on this principle, “It is within our capability to accept someone for their intrinsic worth without necessarily accepting what they believe or how they act.” And she points out that it takes maturity to be able to separate being from behavior. But accepting someone for who they are does not mean that we accept or condone all of their behavior, especially when it is destructive of community or violates the very principles which call for such acceptance. Owen-Towle advises that we “Set limits. Honor another’s position, yet insist on equal respect for yours. This will foster compromise. Acceptance is a two-way street.”

As a segue between the two parts of this third principle, Owen-Towle states that “If acceptance affirms us as we are, encouragement pushes us toward whom we might become.” There’s that healthy creative tension again between being and becoming.

But what exactly is spiritual growth, and how do we encourage it? There have been many attempts to describe or define spiritual growth, usually using one of a number of metaphors, some of which I’ll share with you in a moment. But my own feeble attempt, in as simple language as possible, is to say that spiritual growth is about going deeper - deepening your understanding of and engagement with yourself and the world around you.

Metaphors are often used to try and describe something subtle and hard to grasp by speaking in terms of something more concrete and comprehensible. The following metaphors, each of which illustrates an aspect of spiritual development, come from the book *Essential Spirituality* by Roger Walsh. Walsh points out that, collectively, these metaphors “paint a rich, multifaceted picture of the ways spiritual practices work their many effects.”

- Awakening: “Our usual condition is semiconscious, say the sages, and spiritual practices awaken us from our slumber.”
- Enlightenment: According to this metaphor, we stumble about in inner darkness, but spiritual disciplines can bring understanding, light and vision.
- Uncovering: Our true nature or Self is said to be covered or veiled from awareness, but spiritual disciplines dissolve these veils and restore awareness of our true identities.
- Metamorphosis: As nature transforms the caterpillar into an exquisite butterfly, so too do spiritual practices transform us.
- Unfolding: The beauty of the rose may be hidden, but is already present within the bud. Likewise, our transcendent beauty and potential are hidden within, and spiritual practices help us unfold and blossom.

- Wholeness: Both spiritual traditions and modern psychology suggest that our minds are sadly splintered and dissociated into warring fragments. Spiritual practices heal the mind and restore us to unity of mind and purpose.
- Journey: The metaphor of the journey implies that we are traveling to a goal. This goal can seem a far-off distant place, but spiritual wisdom reveals that the goal is our Self and is forever here and now, awaiting only our recognition and remembrance, in this and every moment.

You may have your own set of images or metaphors for thinking about and understanding your spiritual growth and development. Adding them into the mix may create an even richer and more complete big picture. In any case, all of these different ways of thinking about spiritual growth make it even clearer that none of us is in any position to define and prescribe the spiritual path of another. But while we don't tell one another exactly which path to walk, we can urge and encourage one another to get out there walking somewhere. And how do we go about providing that encouragement?

As a religious community, one thing that we certainly can and do provide is a regular weekly religious service. Some services may seem more spiritual and conducive to growth than others, but I hope that every service will contain elements of encouragement for individual and communal exploration of our intimate connections with ourselves, with each other, and with the world around us. As I've said many times, for me the essence of spirituality is the totality of connections, both visible and invisible, that define our place in the interdependent web of all existence and in all of our relationships. And that is what I think we come here to explore.

Such exploration also occurs in smaller, more intimate settings. Let me mention two current opportunities. Beginning this Tuesday, Jean Wiant and I will be leading a curriculum called "Building Your Own Theology," which encourages reflection and discussion on a number of fundamental religious questions, and helps participants to articulate their own current understandings and beliefs. It's not too late to participate if you sign up today after the service in the foyer. The other opportunity is Small Group Ministry, which encompasses several ongoing groups of six to twelve people each, that meet once or twice a month to reflect and share on a variety of topics designed to encourage spiritual growth and close, trusting relationships. If you think you may be interested, there will be a potluck supper here a week from next Friday (Oct. 27) at 6:00 pm, introducing the program, and even providing a sample session to give an idea of what it's like.

Those are some things that we as a congregation do to encourage spiritual growth. There are some other things you as individuals can do as well. For instance, you can encourage your friends to stretch themselves – to try new skills through adult classes, committee work, or participation in worship services – and praise their efforts. You can also make the same efforts to stretch yourself, thus setting a good example for others. And I'd like to offer one more specific opportunity. This is an idea that has been suggested a number of times, by a number of people, and I think its time has come. I would like to invite those of you who are willing, to share a bit of your personal credo – or statement of belief – in a future worship service. If you are interested, speak with me, and we will arrange a time for you to do that. I think such sharings will encourage all of us to revisit our own beliefs and spiritual state of health.

Those are my thoughts on acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth – at least at this moment. If you'd like to talk about anything that my words have stirred

up in your mind, or about your thoughts on this topic, I will gather with you here in the front of the sanctuary in about a half-hour.

In closing, I'd like to share a story from Rachel Naomi Remen's book *My Grandfather's Blessings*, which I think captures well the spirit of acceptance, spiritual growth, and the sharing of our gifts with one another. It's called "Teachers Everywhere":

I can clearly remember something that happened when I was in third grade. I was walking with my mother on a downtown street in New York City, pushing through crowds on our way to I no longer remember where. I had just been put into a special class at school because I had done well on an IQ test, and my new teacher had told us that being in her class meant that we were brighter than most of the people in the country. As we moved through the hurrying crowds, I remembered this and was filled with an eight-year-old's outrageous pride. I told my mother that my teacher had said that I was smarter than most of the people around us. She stopped walking immediately and knelt down so that we were at eye level with each other. As the crowd flowed past us on either side, she told me that every one of the people around us had a secret wisdom; each of them knew something more about how to live, about being happy, about loving than I did.

I looked up at the people passing by. They were all adults. "Is this because they are all grown-ups, Mama?" I asked her, taken aback. "No, darling. It will always be that way," she told me. "It is how things are." I looked again at the crowd moving around us. Suddenly I wanted to know them all, to learn from them, to be friends.

This lesson became lost among the many others of my childhood, but shortly after I became a physician I had a dream that was so powerful that I remembered it even though I did not understand it. In this dream, I am standing in the threshold of a door. I seem to have been standing there a long time. People are passing through the door. I cannot see where they are going or where they have come from, but somehow this does not seem to matter. I meet them one at a time in the doorway. As they pass through they stop and look into my face for a moment and hand me something, each one something different. They say, "Here, here is something for you to keep." And then they go on. I feel enormously grateful.

Perhaps we are all standing in such a doorway. Some people pass through it on their way to the rest of their lives, lives that we may never know or see. Others pass through it to their deaths and the Unknown. Everyone leaves something behind. When I awoke from that dream, I had a sense of the value of every life.

May each of us be ever prepared to share with others our gifts – our gifts of acceptance, of encouragement, of love and compassion. And may we each be open to the gifts of others, seeing in each of them yet one more source of the nuggets of wisdom that, taken together, make us who and what we are, and what we can yet become.

So may it be.