

The fifth of the seven principles adopted by the 1984 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, and reaffirmed the next year, is "the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large".

Now, Unitarian Universalism is - at least for income tax purposes - a religion. So a naive observer might well ask, "Certainly, religion as most people think of it has something, even a great deal, to do with 'conscience'. But what does it have to do with 'the democratic process'? And what do 'conscience' and 'the democratic process' have to do with one another? Why put them together in one principle? Is it just because 'eight principles' doesn't sound as catchy, or lucky, or something as 'seven principles'?"

I have answers to those questions that, being a UU, I can't claim are *the* answers. Also, being a UU, I find easy and straightforward answers boring, so the fifteen or twenty minutes I am going to spend on them today represents only a small fraction of the time I could spend on the subject.

First of all, let's face the fact that "the right of conscience" is all very inspiring in the abstract, but gets us in trouble once we get down to specifics. The reason is, simply, that exercising it affects other people.

The most basic level of the right of conscience pertains to its *formation*. Affirming it at this level means affirming the individual's right to free access to whatever ideas and information he or she considers material in the formation of ideas of right and wrong.

The second level is that of the *symbolic expression* of conscience, which can involve verbal attacks that inflict psychological pain.

The final level is that of *behavior* based on one's beliefs regarding right or wrong. This is the level at which others are most affected.

Now, it isn't just fundamentalist right-wing loonies who get in on the all-American sport of interfering with the right of other Americans to form and express their consciences. Nat Hentoff has written a terrific book called *Free Speech for Me - But Not for Thee*, tellingly subtitled *How the American Left and Right Relentlessly Censor Each Other*. In it, he provides plenty of examples of what I am talking about if you want to read further on this subject. Some people would withhold books from schoolchildren on the grounds of 'obscene' or 'unpatriotic' content, would prohibit speech and writing that imperils the morale of American troops, and would insist that a doctor should not be allowed to abort a fetus even though his conscience tells him it is the right thing to do; others call for banning *Huckleberry Finn* from school libraries because of its use of the

'n' word, punishing speech and writing that promotes hatred of minorities, and argue that a doctor should be required to perform an abortion even when her conscience tells her it is wrong.

At this point I have two questions for you to ask of yourselves: first, what kind of restrictions on the expression of the right of conscience do you find defensible; and second, *why* do you find them defensible? I don't want you to think about the *good* reasons you can come up with in the way of intellectual arguments, but your *real* reasons for wanting people to be protected from certain ideas or prevented from expressing or acting on them.

I hope that this isn't another case of my emotional responses to things being so weirdly unlike those of normal human beings that I might as well be from another planet, but speaking for myself, when I feel the impulse to clap my hands over my or another's ears, or over another person's mouth, it is almost always because I am afraid. Sometimes I am afraid of the effect that what is being said or done will have on another, usually more vulnerable, person; sometimes I am afraid of the effect an idea will have on myself: perhaps this system of right and wrong I have built up in my mind is really a house of cards, and this alien thought is the breeze that will send it tumbling to the ground.

I'm no religious scholar, but it seems to me that the most frequent phrase in the Bible is "Be not afraid". I used to understand those words as I think most people do, as a paraphrase for, "Don't worry. Everything will be all right; God will kiss all your boo-boos and make them better". But lately I got to thinking about why, if that's really what it means, there is so much resistance to the messages of love and peace accompanying it. Maybe it's really a directive, a commandment if you will: "Stop being afraid; stop giving in to the most destructive of human emotions. Learn to overcome your fear, or at least to endure it so that it doesn't paralyze you or drive you to make an idiot of yourself".

So if it is fear that drives us to restrict the formation or expression of other people's consciences, I think we need to ask ourselves if we are doing anyone a favor by calling for those restrictions. This applies even if - perhaps *especially* if - our fear is 'altruistic', if we say we want to 'protect' someone else from damage. There is a view that is getting increasing traction from health authorities that the rapid rise of asthma in young people is at least partly due to the attempts parents make to sterilize their children's environment as much as possible; with nothing else to do, and severely limited experience distinguishing 'enemy' from 'friendly' cells, children's immune systems turn on their own bodies. Since the conscience is in effect the soul's immune system, in the same way, our children - all of us, in fact - need to be exposed to 'enemy' ideas for our consciences to develop properly.

We've just used - for the second week in a row, as it happens - a responsive reading from the great poet John Milton. In case you don't recognize the source, it was a series of passages from his *Areopagitica* - in my opinion, the most eloquent defense of the principle of freedom of expression in the English language. There's another passage from that work that applies here:

"I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary but slinks out of the race, where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat. Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather; that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary. That virtue therefore which is but a youngling in the contemplation of evil, and knows not the utmost that vice promises to her followers, and rejects it, is but a blank virtue, not a pure..."

And this is where democracy comes in.

Notice that the fifth principle refers to the "*process* of democracy". I don't know how or why that word was inserted, but I'm really glad it was. A commitment to the *process* of democracy, as I see it, is simply a commitment to search for certain truths in the community of others. Those others are coequal in that search - there are no individuals or groups in the community that have a permanent privileged status - and the purpose of the group is the search itself, not a 'set of deliverables', to use the fashionable corporate jargon. Since there is no need to produce anything, there is no need for regular, formal polls to establish the current sense of the 'state of the truth', and the only time there may be a need to take a vote is to decide who or who is not a member of the community and to establish ground rules for the search and communication of one's findings - although even these issues may be handled informally, without an actual show of hands or other form of balloting. Note that in this context, "Two heads are better than one" is the operative principle; the dueling proverb "Too many cooks spoil the broth" is irrelevant, since there is no broth to be produced.

Democracy is, of course, also a system of government, a way of making decisions, whether for a nation or for an institution of civil society like the congregation of this church. A *system* of democracy uses the democratic *process* as a kind of magic eight-ball. When a decision is required - who is the best person for this position? should we adopt a belligerent or pacific policy? - the globe is rotated so that the glass window is on top and the answer that floats into view is taken, not as the ultimate 'truth', but the best approximation available at the time. Churchill was referring to democracy as a *system* when he called it "the worst form of government except for all those others that have been tried." How *can*

you summon up any more praise than that for something that produces results like the one the year before last, when the good people of Wisconsin made the democratic decision to enshrine in our state constitution the so-called 'traditional' - but in reality newfangled, and still far from universally accepted - notion that marriage is the union of one man and one - and only one - woman?

If we concentrate on the *process* of democracy, however, we avoid having to defend such preposterous decisions. Moreover, although the democratic process was originally used to search for truths of a political nature, we need not confine it to that task. We can use it, for example, to exercise and refine our consciences: as the arena where that 'race' Milton talks about is run.

If we *do* use the democratic process this way, I think we have to be prepared to do two very difficult things.

The first, to use the title of Danielle Allen's excellent book on redefining the rules of democratic citizenship, is 'talking to strangers'. It should be noted that that title plays off the maternal admonition, 'Don't talk to strangers'; but in the content of the book, she makes it clear that what she really has in mind is talking *with* strangers. In other words, we are called upon not only to walk up to people we don't know, who don't look like us or talk like us, and may not think like us, but to engage them in conversation, meaning we have to take our turn *listening* - and not only with our ears but our hearts.

Let me give an example of what I mean by 'listening with the heart'. Recently, I picked up a book called *The Female Brain*. It has a lot of interesting material about the differences between men's and women's thinking, most of it confirming the title of Ashley Montagu's book, *The Natural Superiority of Women*. Rather to my surprise, my wife reacted with suspicion, even hostility, to the parts of the book I read to her.

I was puzzled, until I remembered a couple of things. First was a catchphrase from an old radio show that I remember reading about: Baron von Munchausen, which ran in 1933-4, with Jack Pearl in the title role as the celebrated teller of tall tales, and Cliff Hall as his sidekick Charlie. When Charlie would question the credibility of the Baron's whoppers, von Munchausen would retort, 'Vass you dere, Charlie?'

The second was an incident that happened just after we got married. Debbie had an insurance policy that she wanted to change so that I was the beneficiary. No problem - except that since the policy was written in Debbie's native state of Texas, the law at the time was that *I had to sign an authorization for the change*. (If she had decided on the change before we married, her father would have had to sign).

So I realized that in order to understand her reaction to the book, I had to accept the fact that, no, I wasn't there, Charlie: I didn't grow up a girl in a state where girls had to put up with that kind of garbage. I didn't grow up a girl in a state where any differences between men and women were systematically interpreted, and even enacted into law, at women's expense.

Going back to what I said before about fear - when we are talking with strangers, we need to accept the fact that *their* fears, however irrational they may appear to us - as Debbie's reaction to *The Female Brain* struck me as irrational - are fully as real and justified to them as ours are to us, and it is *our* fears that may well seem irrational to them.

The second very difficult thing we need to do, if we want to use the political process as a gym for our consciences, is to accept the need for candor. We need to put up with 'hate speech', with disgusting ideas that would have horrible consequences if put into action - *as long as that speech remains speech and those ideas remain ideas*.

Let me talk a little more about the issue of hate speech. It's true that "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me" is mere whistling in the dark; *of course* words can hurt, can hurt dreadfully, can cause physiological damage in fact. But saying that one 'solves' the problem of hate speech by making it illegal is also whistling in the dark.

For one thing, how do you go about identifying it? Consider the same three words: 'You're so smart!' (admiringly) versus 'You're so smart' (sneeringly). I still cringe inside when people comment on my intelligence or knowledge, as I wait for the other shoe to drop, because when I was growing up those comments were almost never intended as compliments. I'm not pretending that this qualifies me to 'feel the pain' of those enduring racial or homophobic epithets, but my experience does illustrate the problem in forbidding certain words or phrases. Is 'Negro' condescending or a term of respect? Is 'gay'? Depending on the generation, depending on the area of the country, they may be either.

For another, prohibiting 'hate speech' drives 'hate thought' underground, so that the victims of the latter have no idea how they stand with others. When my grandparents came to this country, some people called them 'bohunks' or 'hunkies'. That was very hurtful, I'm sure. But the fact that people were allowed to use those terms set those who *did* use them clearly apart from those who did not. If some woman whose floors my maternal grandmother was scrubbing referred to her as a 'hunkie', my grandmother would know right away to start looking for another job. And if another woman was visiting that malevolent hausfrau and *reproached* her for using the term, my grandmother would know that

*that* woman would make a much more satisfactory employer.

Finally, think about this little verse of William Blake:

I was angry with my friend:  
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.  
I was angry with my foe:  
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

Venting one's hatred doesn't always lead to its dissipation; but sometimes it does, with spectacular results. I will close with an example.

Earlier this week, I watched a television biography of Pete Seeger. One incident related in the show moved me very deeply.

During the Vietnam war, Seeger gave a concert at which he delivered his usual demand that the government bring the boys home. One of those attending was a veteran of the war, and was appalled at the implication that the war in which he had suffered so much and for which so many of his buddies had died or been maimed was pointless. He resolved to kill Seeger.

It wasn't clear to me whether that veteran announced his intention or simply expressed a more general hostility toward the singer. In any case, those in his entourage wanted to prevent him from going backstage, but Seeger insisted he be allowed to see him - in private. Seeger didn't say exactly what they talked about, but in the end the two of them sang 'We Shall Overcome' together. And the young man wept, saying that for the first time in a long time, he felt 'clean' - clean, Seeger explained, of the hatred that had soiled his soul for so long.

That shows what *one* person, listening with his heart to what a stranger has to say, however hate-filled it may be, can accomplish: bring a conscience that is all but dead back to life. If we all cultivate that kind of courage and that kind of compassion, think of what we might do. Think of what we have done with only a glimmer of those qualities in the past: we have fooled tyrant after tyrant, from King George through Hitler through, God willing, Osama bin Laden into believing that the messy, inefficient, argumentative mess we call our American system is weak, when in fact the courage and steadfastness that it takes just to participate in it is our greatest strength.

The morning after I watched that program, I came across a wonderfully apropos poem that I remembered from my high school years, written by the lamentably all but forgotten Edward Markham - a Universalist, incidentally - called "Outwitted":

He drew a circle that shut me out —  
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.  
But Love and I had the wit to win:  
We drew a circle that took him in!