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MAC Arrow

Unitarian Universalist

Multiracial Unity Action Council
(UUMUAC)

“For the Unity of the
light and dark skinned
people of the world.”

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Preamble

Racism and related forms of prejudice are revealed when someone treats another person differently due to their perceived race or ethnicity. These prejudices affect people around the world. Such disrespectful conduct is especially harmful in religious communities because of their commitment to strong ethical and moral standards.

Vision Statement

We envision our congregations, associations, and communities as being not color blind but color appreciative; as judging and treating people by the content of their character, not the color of their skin, their cultural heritage, or other identity; and as treasuring all forms of diversity in the context of Martin Luther King’s Jr’s “Beloved Community.” We call this vision Multiracial Unity.

Mission Statement

It is the mission of the Unitarian Universalist Multiracial Unity Action Council to foster activities for multiracial unity and to counter racism and neo-racism through worship, education, bearing witness, and other actions, and to find and engage like-minded individuals and groups.

We affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and strive to defend freedom, reason, and tolerance as articulated in the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism adopted in 1985. This includes promoting their use in individual congregations, through congregational autonomy, and in

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Many Truths, One Search

A Reflection on the Fourth Unitarian Universalist Principle

By David Organ

Introduction: The Paradox of Our Principle

The fourth principle of Unitarian Universalism calls us to "a free and responsible search for truth and meaning." But this principle contains a paradox: The more freely we search for truth, the more we discover that truth itself is not one thing. Truth functions differently in science than in poetry, in mathematics than in ethics, in history than in art. Our search for truth leads us to discover that truth is itself plural.

I want to explore what it means to search for truth in a world where truth comes in multiple forms, drawing on the political and ethical framework developed by American political theorist William E. Connolly, which he terms 'deep pluralism', and the philosophy of Paul Tillich, to suggest that our fourth principle isn't about finding one unified answer—it's about learning to navigate multiple legitimate ways of being true.

The Failure of One-Size-Fits-All Truth

When we say something is true, what do we mean? The answer depends on what we're talking about. "Water boils at 100 degrees Celsius" is true because it corresponds to observable reality—we can test and measure it. But "all people have inherent worth and dignity" is also true, though not in the same way. We can't put dignity under a microscope, yet we commit our lives on this truth.

Or when someone says "this poem is true to my experience"—what kind of truth is that? Not scientific, not moral, but aesthetic truth that reveals rather than proves.

Different Domains, Different Truths

Deep pluralism suggests we stop trying to unify all truth. Instead, recognize that different domains legitimately employ different truth concepts.

In science, truth often means correspondence—hypotheses accurately map onto observable phenomena. But science also has pragmatic elements; theories are accepted when they successfully predict and enable intervention.

In mathematics, truth functions like coherence—statements are true when they follow logically from axioms, like the Pythagorean theorem. But mathematicians also speak of 'deep' truths: concepts like zero that enabled calculus and modern physics, opening entirely new landscapes of possibility.

In ethics, moral principles are "true" when they enable human flourishing. Legal truth is procedurally defined. Historical truth combines what happened with interpretive frameworks. Aesthetic truth reveals possibilities rather than corresponding to reality.

We already live this plurality. Scientists, judges, historians, and artists operate with different truth concepts daily. The question is whether we can do so consciously and responsibly.

Tilich's "Ultimate Concern": A Different Kind of Religious Truth

20th century existentialist philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich argued that religious truth operates according to its own logic—neither scientific nor simply emotional, but existential.

Tillich defined faith as "the state of being ultimately concerned." Faith means being grasped by something that concerns you unconditionally. Everyone has some ultimate concern—whether God, justice, love, nation, or enlightenment—that organizes and gives meaning to existence.

He distinguished authentic faith—directed toward what is truly ultimate—from idolatrous faith, which treats something finite as infinite. When we make wealth or power our ultimate concern, we commit idolatry. Finite things cannot bear the weight of ultimate meaning.

Crucially, Tillich insisted that genuine faith includes doubt. "Doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith." Faith is the courage to affirm meaning despite the threat of meaninglessness.

Navigation Multiple Truths: The Challenge

This might sound like relativism. If different domains have different truths, is any belief as good as any other?

If all truths are relative, there is no objective standard by which to measure reality, making it impossible to rely on the consistent laws governing science, engineering, or a shared legal system. For example, no one truly acts like a relativist when they visit a doctor or board a plane, as they rely on objective facts and physical laws.

Within each domain, there are still standards for better and worse. Scientific theories can be well-supported or poorly supported. Ethical arguments can be more or less coherent. Pluralism isn't "anything goes."

Deep pluralism makes a positive claim about existence: reality itself is characterized by plurality, becoming, and irreducible difference. Genuine pluralism generates ethical pressure toward engagement rather than elimination. A monist view that there's "One True Account" generates pressure toward conquest or conversion. If you experience existence as gift rather than burden, and recognize that gift as irreducibly plural, certain stances become more consonant with that experience than others—generosity over resentment, engagement over elimination.

Some truths, like basic logical principles, might be universal across domains—though even here, reality has surprised us. At the quantum level, particles exist in multiple states simultaneously until observed, and remain instantaneously correlated across any distance—behaviours that violate our deepest intuitions about how reality should work. Even our most fundamental truths, then, should be held with intellectual humility.

But here's an important challenge: How do we decide which truth-mode applies when? Consider climate change. Is this purely a scientific question about atmospheric chemistry and temperature data? Or is it also a moral question about our obligations to creation and future generations? Or a political question about justice and responsibility? The answer, of course, is that it's all of these. Complex real-world issues don't fit neatly into one domain.

This is where our principle becomes not just free but responsible. A free search means we don't let any single authority—scientific, religious, or otherwise—dictate what counts as truth everywhere. A responsible search means we learn to discern which modes of truth are appropriate where, and how they interact with each other.

A Soto Zen Illustration

In Soto Zen Buddhism, practitioners engage in zazen—"just sitting" meditation. The instruction is simple: sit upright, breathe naturally, let thoughts pass without grasping. The practice doesn't aim at achieving some special state. As Zen master Dogen Zenji taught, zazen is not a means to enlightenment—zazen itself is enlightenment.

If you approach this with scientific truth-criteria, you might study neurological effects. Neuroscience has found that meditation affects brain patterns, reduces stress, enhances attention. That's scientifically true and valuable.

But Zen operates according to different truth-logic. The Zen truth of zazen isn't about brain states—it's about directly realizing your buddha-nature. When Dogen wrote "to study the self is to forget the self," he wasn't making a psychological claim to be verified empirically. He was pointing to a transformative insight that emerges through practice itself.

The truth of zazen is performative—true in the doing. Neuroscience and Zen aren't contradictory—they address different questions. A responsible search embraces both modes of truth, each appropriate to its domain.

THE SCIENCE AND RELIGION DEBATE

Scientific truth aims at predictive accuracy. Religious truth aims at existential orientation and transformational experience. These are different truth-projects, not competing descriptions.

Consider consciousness. Neuroscience offers causal-functional truths. Buddhism offers phenomenological-practical truths about the constructed self. Christianity offers narrative-theological truths about humankind being in the image of God. These aren't contradictory—they're different modes using consciousness as their object.

Problems arise from category mistakes. When creationists treat Genesis as competing with evolutionary biology, they've imported scientific criteria into text operating by a different logic. When materialists claim neuroscience "proves" religious experience is "nothing but" brain states, they assume empirical descriptions exhaust reality.

Both moves are errors—not because one side is right, but because they're applying truth-criteria from one domain to claims operating in another.

Practical Wisdom for Plural Truth

How do we navigate this plurality? With what the Greeks called *phronesis*—practical wisdom.

First, become fluent in multiple truth-modes. Like multilingual speakers, learn to shift between empirical, ethical, aesthetic, and spiritual registers without contradiction. A responsible search means discerning which modes apply where—and no single authority, scientific or religious, dictates truth everywhere.

Second, practice collaborative translation. Buddhist mindfulness has been brought into therapeutic contexts while maintaining connection to deeper sources. When someone struggles with depression, do they need medication, spiritual counsel, or both? No algorithm decides. We need each other, bringing diverse gifts to shared questions.

Third, embrace productive tension—and doubt. Some conflicts between frameworks push both toward greater sophistication. And if truth is genuinely plural, none of us holds the whole picture. The courage to keep searching despite uncertainty is itself an act of faith.

Finally, remember the search is never finished. There's no moment of arrival. The searching itself shapes who we become. This is what our principle asks of us—not answers, but the ongoing practice of seeking.

Conclusion: The Courage to Be Plural

I began noting the paradox: the free search for truth leads us to discover that truth itself is plural. But perhaps it's not really a paradox. Perhaps it's exactly what we should expect.

If reality is infinitely rich, if human experience encompasses quantum mechanics to mystical union, mathematical proofs to moral struggle, why would we expect one simple theory to capture it all? The plurality of truth is a sign of reality's abundance.

Our fourth principle calls us to a free and responsible search. In a world of plural truths, freedom means refusing to let any single authority dictate what counts as true. Responsibility means learning to navigate multiple truth-modes with wisdom. Together, they call us to courage—the courage to be truthful in multiple ways, to search without guarantees, to affirm meaning in a complex world.

This is our gift as Unitarian Universalists. We don't offer simple answers. We offer a community of seekers who take truth seriously enough to recognize its plurality, who respect both scientific rigor and spiritual depth.

The search for truth and meaning isn't a problem to solve—it's a practice to live. We live it together, bringing diverse ways of knowing into conversation, learning from each other, remaining open to truths we haven't yet imagined.

May our search be both free and responsible. May we have the courage to embrace truth's plurality. And may we continue, always, to search together.



At Long Last

By Rev. Larry McClellan

(Drawn from a sermon at the Unitarian Universalist Community Church
in Park Forest, Illinois - March 22,2026)

To begin, revisit Luke 10: 25 – 37 The Good Samaritan Story

Jesus does not really identify the man who is attacked.

But he definitely identifies the man who responds – the Samaritan

Who helps, who is the neighbor, who acts like a decent human being?

The Samaritan - Why this one??

In Palestine - historic Judea centered on Jerusalem

historic Samaria is just north and centered on Mt. Gerizim

Both the people of Abraham and Moses - So spiritual roots are the same

Both value the Torah – but see it differently

Heart of worship – for Jews – the Temple in Jerusalem

For Samaritans – the Temple on Mt. Gerizim

However, from the Jewish point of view –

The Samaritans are different from us, they cannot be trusted

Yes, we live close by, we have the same roots

BUT – Their values are different

How can they believe that stuff?

To use some modern language –

they do not see the obvious truth,

they're idiots, they've been brainwashed by their leaders

they've abandoned the founding fathers – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob

they don't care about the founding principles

AND - of course, the Samaritans felt the same way about the Jews

They thought the Jews have abandoned the right path, had the wrong ideas

EACH ending up: You are the OTHER, you do not understand, you are wrong.

So – there are these polarized people.

And what does Jesus do ?

He says to his Jewish listeners – this “OTHER” is the good guy.

This one you despise is the full human being

NOW – how radical is that?

The one you despise is the full human being, the compassionate one

And what might that say to us ??

In the midst of war

In the midst of culture clashes

Of people getting categorized and stereotyped

Under all our opinions – on the war, on immigration, on a national government going crazy,
on people living in opinions silos

There is, for us, a **great “Samaritan Question”**

Maybe the full human being, maybe the “compassionate one”

Maybe the person who can really respond to injury and tragedy – is OVER THERE

So, thinking about polarization, about divided peoples, about us being a divided people. I started thinking about tone of the last times this was really serious in our country, as it is now.

Looked at the McCarthy era – around 1950 – 55

The savage accusations about “Communists destroying our country”

The country divided by a cruel Senator, willing to throw out lies and make
accusations with no regard for consequences or the truth

“There are 130 Communists and subversives in our defense plants”

Then in June of 1954, in the midst of a set of hearings – the Army-McCarthy Hearings

An attorney for the Army, Joseph Welch, demanded that the attorney for
Sen McCarthy produce by sundown the list of names – who are the 130 ??

And I guess I always assumed that the historic great confrontation with McCarthy
was about those names - but not exactly.

When Welch demanded the list of 130 names, Joe McCarthy intervened and said the is Welch was so concerned about names he should start by investigating a young man in his law firm, Fred Fisher, a young subversive. Welch knew Fisher well and knew he was no subversive or communist.

However, it was when McCarthy dragged Fisher’s name into the hearing,

At that cruelty to defame a young man – Welch responded:

“Have you no decency, sir, at long last, have you no decency?”

And McCarthy's power to bully and distract and accuse soon rapidly declined

They were fighting this bully, but *the break point, the illumination, the passion*
Erupts over the *damage to one man* – Fred Fisher.

And it struck me –

Jesus did not just say “*love your enemies,*” although that is radically strong.

But in the particular,

He said “Look at *this man, the Other, and honor him* as the neighbor”

Joseph Welch did not just argue about the accusations, the lists of subversives

He responded to the particular, the person singled out

In both stories, in the midst of a totally polarized situation,

all breaks open over the question of humanity.

And both stories point a direction for US.

We are in what appears to be a hopelessly polarized America.

President Trump, along with many others, have opened the gates to allow the language of polarization

And the Left and, of course, those close by are “terrorists”

And the Right and, of course, those close by are “ignorant”

We lob opinions and accusations against one another.

And words matter, and words hurt, and words shape what we see.

The Right is hysterical about saving the country

And throws hateful language

The Left is hysterical about saving the country

And throws hateful language

I suppose just about all of us in this place are in the middle and to the left. And consider all the hateful, sneering, “You all should have known what would happen,” “it’s all your fault”, “what stupid, mindless, cruel people,” kind of language. We throw this at Trump supporters who are fellow-countrymen and women. . . . And we all have been a part of that.

It is time to stop. At long last, we have to stop this.

As people of faith, as people here of spirit and mystery –

At long last -we have to stop it

We have to break the pattern; we have to break the language .

We are called to assert our common humanity and our common sense of decency.

We have to shift the focus from our divided opinions to our common work.

You may support the war on Iran –

But together how do we re-affirm that our beloved country

Is for peace-making and not war-starting –what do we do?

What do we do when an American missile kills over 130 children in a school

This is not collateral damage, this is an American tragedy – so what do we do?

You may support the crackdown on immigrants

But together – how do we help all the families torn apart and stop this family
destruction?

You may want to shrink the federal government

But together – how do we make sure we have effective disaster relief
And effective disease control, and accurate weather analysis?

It is in these particulars, it is in the humanity question.

That we can build common ground

At long last, we have to stop the blood sports of attacking each other

With Trump haters and Trump lovers and all those in between.

Grab the challenges – It is not: You must change!

Rather, it is; what now do we do?

WE have deep divisions and differing visions of what is needed.

However, we are carving up each other.

Jesus said it - the OTHER ONE is a full person, not a stereotype.

Joseph Welch said it – do not destroy individuals.

So, let's just stop.

Here you are, here we are – people of spirit and mystery, people of faith

We are called to help stop this madness that divides us all.

There is this demand for a spiritual discipline that guides us, each of us

To affirm community, to be peacemakers, to honor every soul

Perhaps to seek out adversaries we know and work together,

To find our common humanity in creative actions together.

At long last, to move from judgment to common work.

The Best Anti-Racism Builds Community Assets, Not Collective Guilt

By Dr. Kenneth Christiansen

Racism is alive and well. This essay, written in 2010, describes and evaluates two very different strategies utilized during the previous 65 years for opposing it. 1) Change discriminatory laws and policies. 2) Convince individuals who benefit from a racist world that they need to think and act differently.

One of these strategies works and one doesn't.

First a word of introduction. For seventeen years at Defiance College in Defiance, Ohio, I taught Cultural Diversity classes every semester to a collection of Education majors, Criminal Justice majors, Social Work majors, Religion Majors, and a smattering of others. The student population in my classes, like the college itself, was mostly but not all white. My assigned task was to help prepare these students to work professionally in schools and agencies where they would be working with children and adults from every race, ethnicity, and economic background. I had one semester to make a difference in their lives.

At the beginning of every class, we began by looking at the history of prejudice, discrimination and oppression in our country. Somewhere in the first several weeks it inevitably became clear that many or most of the Caucasian students in the class were feeling a lot of guilt. Not guilt for things they themselves had done. Rather, guilt for things members of their race had done historically. Or guilt for the advantages they or their racial ancestors enjoyed at others' expense. This would typically cause them to show signs of shutting down; to parse every response they made in class discussion; to become very unsure of themselves. Open class discussion became more difficult. I could only imagine how tongue-tied they would be at the end of the semester, or when helping a student or client of their own in their chosen profession in later life, if I let this continue.

My response was to share what I observed to be an empowering message. That is, if you actually have done any of the horrible things we were reading about, go ahead and feel guilty. If, on the other hand, you haven't done them, get angry instead. Get angry at racism and oppression wherever you see it.

Guilt, I explained, is anger directed inward. If you let it build up, it will eventually either eat you up or burst out as anger directed toward others. If, on the other hand, you feel anger instead of guilt when you see injustice or discrimination, that anger can energize you to help build a better world.

The realities of race relations in the UUA present similar challenges. As I read *The Arc of the Universe is Long, Soul Work*, the 1993 report of the UUA Commission on Appraisal titled *Unitarian Universalism and the Quest for Racial Justice* and other publications, it's obvious there's been a rocky history. After much initial conflict, the dominant pattern has separated into two distinct approaches. For people of color, there is a strong emphasis upon and celebration of positive racial and ethnic identities in both adult and youth programming. For

Privilege and the detrimental effects actions of white people as a group have had on people of color. In short, for Caucasians, this is a guilt-based approach to anti-racism.

I want to affirm that all of the actors in the UUA working to do something positive about racism come to the table with good intentions. Nonetheless, there are fundamental choices to be made about how best to bring about equality of both opportunity and outcome. Unfortunately, people who have made different choices, people who have chosen differing strategies, often think the worst of each other. That is human nature.

In all of the disagreements and fighting about these things over these years, through the Crossroads-guided training sessions and tumultuous General Assembly meetings, there is one question I did not see addressed by anyone. That question gets back to the circumstances I described in my classroom at the beginning of this talk. The question is, what do we really know about the psychological effects of collective guilt? What do we really know on the basis of actual research someone has done?

Learning more about the positives and negatives of collective guilt might offer an answer to three more questions. Should our focus be on the collective guilt of the individuals who are part of historic oppressor groups? Or would we gain more by focusing directly on the social and cultural mechanisms of racism and discrimination that need changing? And last but not least, would we best accomplish our goals by working together or working separately?

I went on a search in the social psychological literature for any solid, research-based, information I could find about the effects of emphasizing collective guilt. After following several dead ends, I found a book published in 2004 titled *Collective Guilt: International Perspectives*. It defines collective guilt and looks in depth at its effects in the Middle East, Northern Ireland, Germany, Australia, and the United States.

I also found several journal articles including a 2007 research report titled *Racial attitudes in response to thoughts of white privilege*. This is a replicable study of white American college students in Kansas. In the first part of that study, students were asked to reflect in writing on one of three randomly selected topics: the advantages of being white, the disadvantages of being white, or a race-neutral topic. Then all study subjects were asked to fill out a questionnaire on modern racist attitudes. So what were the results? In short, study subjects who were “assigned to think about white privilege expressed higher levels of racism compared to those assigned to think about white disadvantage or a race-irrelevant topic.”

In the second part of the study the researchers added two more factors: how deeply individuals identify with their race; and their political orientation along a conservative – liberal scale.

What they found is that “increased racism in response to thoughts of white privilege was limited to those who highly identified with their racial category.” In contrast, when individuals did not identify strongly with their own racial category, thoughts of white privilege tended to reduce the level of racism.

Regarding political orientation, subjects who were more liberal tended to be less racist in general compared to subjects who were more conservative. We would expect that. However, and this is very important: even for the more liberal study participants, the degree of modern racism expressed correlated positively with how deeply they identified as white.

A chilling conclusion of the second part of the study is as follows, and I quote: “Efforts to reduce racism often involve highlighting the existence of racial inequality. For whites, however, pointing out their privileged position in the social structure represents a challenge to the status of the ingroup – precisely the context that our data suggest will increase racism.”

So what are the lessons for the UUA from this study?

Lesson 1: Stop asking Caucasian UUAs who care about racial justice to identify first and foremost as white! I find it hard to escape the conclusion that the Crossroads approach and its successor approaches in the annual conferences of the Allies for Racial Equity and our contemporary Identity Based Ministries do just that. Rather, a much stronger antidote to racism and basis for social justice work is to encourage people to get to know each other and to identify with each other across racial lines fully and completely in all of our hopes and dreams, joys and pains. And to work on common projects together.

I am going to put what I have reported above into my own words. Stressing white guilt and white identity tends to engender either a paralysis or a backlash. The alternative, stressing a common humanity in the face of all of the evils of the past and present, tends to engender both empathy and the motivation to build a better world.

So much for guilt-based anti-racism. I promised to say something about asset-based anti-racism. That is the real pay dirt.

What do I mean by “asset-based anti-racism.” Part of what I mean by the term is, anti-racism that works best brings every asset available into the struggles for racial equity. Every asset. For instance, in the fight to stop the slave trade on the high seas in 18th and early 19th centuries, William Wilberforce and John Newton, both white, were the primary driving forces, the primary assets. Wilberforce used his “white privilege” in many ways to build a better world for all.

In the successful fight against slavery in the United States, both blacks and whites were irreplaceably involved. My thoughts go to the Amistad incident, 1839-41. Black Africans being transported on the Amistad to North America to become slaves successfully revolted. When later captured and incarcerated, a small group of white church people paid for their first lawyer. The case went all the way to the Supreme Court where John Quincy Adams – the former president of the United States, a Unitarian, and very white – carried the arguments to a successful conclusion in favor of the Africans.

In the civil rights struggles of the 1950’s and 60’s in the United States under the leadership of Dr. King, a broad collaboration of blacks and whites, all of whom saw injustice and wanted change, won major civil rights battles in many but not all areas. One area missed was criminal justice. Michelle Alexander, author of the recent amazing book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, effectively argues that our current criminal justice system, and particularly the War On Drugs, is a social control system rather than a crime control system. I had not realized the ubiquitous extent to which the Supreme Court has legitimated racial bias and racial discrimination in policing and prosecution. Alexander argues that a new and very broad-based civil rights movement is urgently needed. It will take all of us, Caucasians and People of Color, seeing each other as assets in the struggle to accomplish that.

Last but not least, I want to share where the term “asset-based anti-racism” came from. It is a takeoff from the term, Asset-Based Community Development. “ABCD” This has become a hot topic amongst community developers generally. They say, rather than looking at the problems a community has, look at its assets. Is there garbage all over? Start a recycling program. It can make money and clean up the neighborhood. Do older people in the community have a lot of health problems? Start a home health care agency. Insurance and governmental subsidies are available. Do seniors and youth need more to do? Start tutoring and mentoring programs. Are jobs in short supply? Start an aggressive job agency that supports job training and on the job mentoring. Not enough affordable housing? Mortgage your church to buy a dilapidated, multi-family housing structure and utilize volunteer labor to rehabilitate it.

I’ll bet you were with me up to the church mortgaging its property. That was the beginning point in 1979 of Bethel New Life, an effort on the west side of Chicago. Bethel Lutheran Church, an aging white congregation in a black neighborhood, asked, “What can we do to increase affordable housing in our community?” They identified a run down, 3-unit structure to buy and rehabilitate. No one would give them a loan. So they utilized their only property asset. These aging white people mortgaged their church building to buy the dilapidated structure and found volunteer workers and trainers to do the actual work of rehabilitation. By 30 years later, in 2009, they had rehabilitated over 1,000 housing units. With a staff of over 250, assets now worth \$40 million, and a current annual budget of \$13.5 million, Bethel New Life runs a recycling program; a full service job agency; a home health care agency; a health clinic serving on average over 1,000 people per week; a school serving 215 K-8 students; an intervention program to help public schools on Chicago’s west side; independent living and assisted living facilities for seniors; and several other program sites. These things have clearly been built on the base of community assets. And everything accomplished has helped to alleviate one or more of the effects of racism. Whites and blacks have worked together on these projects over the years. The current leadership, incubated in the community, is integrated and mostly black.

Coming back to asset-based anti-racism in general, I think this approach deserves a hearing. I think it has a lot to offer over guilt-based anti-racism. Whether the goal is ending racism in the criminal justice system, or in school systems, or in housing or health care or jobs, we need all of the assets we can bring to bear on the situation. And we need them actively involved, not burdened by guilt.

A key point is where we focus. If we each focus on our identities, we don’t have much in common. If, on the other hand, we see each other as positive assets rather than guilt-laden liabilities, we can maximize our positive impact.

The above thoughts were shared on April 30, 2010, at the first Convocation of the Unitarian Universalist Multiracial Unity Action Council (UUMUAC).

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Ethics in a Pluralistic World **By David Organ**

Let me ask you this: Is there such a thing as a universal ethic? Can we find moral principles that work for everyone, everywhere? It's one of those big questions that keeps philosophers up at night—and honestly, it should keep the rest of us thinking too. Because in a world that's more connected than ever, but also more divided, this question really matters. People have been chasing this idea for centuries, and we're still wrestling with it today.

Let's start way back—I mean *way* back. There was this Greek philosopher named Diogenes. He lived around the 4th century BCE—that's "before the common era"—and this guy was a character. Legend has it he lived in a barrel and would walk around Athens with a lantern in broad daylight, claiming he was looking for an honest man. But he said something pretty radical for his time: "I'm a citizen of the world." Not Athens, not Greece—the *world*.

Think about how revolutionary that was. In ancient Greece, your city-state was everything. Your identity, your loyalty, your entire life revolved around whether you were Athenian or Spartan or Corinthian. And here's Diogenes saying, "Nope, I belong to humanity."

For Diogenes, we're all citizens of one universal community—the Cosmopolis. We should treat everyone equally, no matter where they're from or what their background is. It's about expanding that circle of care outward. You naturally love your family, right? You care about your friends. Take those feelings and keep expanding them—to your neighbors, to strangers, to people across the ocean you'll never meet. It's this beautiful combination of empathy and duty.

Fast forward to the 18th century. The Enlightenment is happening in Europe—this incredible period of intellectual ferment. Along comes Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher who rarely left his hometown, who whose ideas traveled the world. He came up with the "categorical imperative." Sounds fancy, but here's what he meant. Only do things that you'd be okay with everyone doing. Like, if you're thinking about lying to get out of

trouble, ask yourself—would I want to live in a world where everyone lies whenever it's convenient? No? Then don't do it.

The second part of his “imperative” is even more powerful: Never treat people as just tools to get what you want—treat them as valuable in themselves. Not as means to your ends, but as ends in themselves. Every person has dignity. Every person matters.

But Western ideals are not accepted everywhere. From antiquity, through the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, to today's debates about global justice, we keep running into the same fundamental problem: How do you respect different cultures while also saying that some things aren't negotiable? How do you draw that line?

Now, the Golden Rule—“do unto others as you would have them do unto you”—that shows up *everywhere*. Christianity has it. Judaism has it. Islam has it. Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism—they've all got versions of this same basic idea. And yeah, international human rights frameworks have gained a lot of traction. The Universal Declaration has been translated into over 500 languages. That's pretty impressive.

But here's the criticism, and it's a serious one: Maybe what we call “universal” is really just Western philosophy dressed up in fancy clothes. Maybe it's Enlightenment thinking with a European pedigree, and when we try to apply it globally, we're not being universal—we're being imperial. Maybe pushing one set of moral standards on everyone is just colonialism with a nicer vocabulary. Cultural imperialism wearing the mask of universalism.

You can see why people would say that. Who wrote the Universal Declaration? Mostly Western powers. Who dominated the philosophical conversation for centuries? European men. When we talk about “human rights,” are we really talking about rights that reflect all of humanity, or are we talking about rights that reflect Western values?

The other side to this debate says, “Look, we're facing climate change, pandemics, artificial intelligence—challenges that don't respect borders. A virus doesn't care about cultural relativism. Climate change doesn't pause for philosophical debates. We need common ground now more than ever.” Even if we're not sure we'll ever fully get there. Even if the destination remains frustratingly out of reach.

So that's the Western conversation. Now let's shift east to Asia, because the story there is just as rich and, honestly, way more diverse.

Asian ethics are an incredible, complicated tapestry woven from ancient philosophy, colonial encounters, and breakneck modernization. And we have to be careful here—“Asia” covers a lot of ground. We're talking about more than half the world's population spread across vastly different cultures.

You've got Confucianism in East Asia—China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam—emphasizing social harmony, hierarchical relationships, and respecting your parents and elders.

Buddhist ideas about compassion and karma spread through Southeast and South Asia—Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Tibet. The focus is on reducing suffering, understanding that all life is interconnected, that our actions have consequences that ripple outward across time and space.

Islamic principles shape ethical life across Central Asia, parts of Southeast Asia like Indonesia and Malaysia, and into South Asia with Pakistan and Bangladesh. And Islamic ethics—we'll get deeper into this in a minute—offers this holistic vision where you can't separate your spiritual life from your daily actions.

Today Asian countries are navigating some absolutely fascinating social, political and ethical territory. You've got economic boom times—look at China's rise, look at the Asian Tigers—Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan. But alongside that, intense debates are underway about democracy versus authoritarianism, individual rights versus collective welfare, and keeping cultural identity intact in the face of globalization.

There's no single story here. What you're seeing is the world's most populous continent saying, "We've got our own ways of thinking about ethics, thank you very much"—while also picking and choosing what works from Western ideas. It's not rejection, and it's not wholesale adoption. It's selective adaptation.

Let me tell you about Islamic ethics for a second, because it offers a holistic approach that's quite different from how Western philosophy often works. In Islamic thought, there's no separation between your spiritual life, your personal character, your family relationships, your business deals, your political engagement—it's all connected. It's all part of living ethically before God.

The goal is what's called *ihsan [is-ran]*—in other words, excellence, beauty in action. It's doing what's right not just on the outside, following the rules mechanically, but with genuine intention, always aware of the Divine.

There's this famous hadith, a saying of the Prophet Muhammad, that defines *ihsan [is-ran]* as worshipping God as if you see Him, and knowing that even if you don't see Him, He sees you. It's about that consciousness.

So what does that look like in practice?

Justice—standing up for the oppressed even when it costs you personally. Even if it's against your own family, your own tribe, your own interests. The Qur'an is *really* emphatic about this.

Compassion and mercy. God is called "the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful" at the beginning of nearly every chapter of the Qur'an. And Muslims are supposed to reflect those qualities in how they treat others. Not just other Muslims—all people, all of creation.

Trustworthiness. Keeping your word, honoring your commitments, being reliable. This extends to responsibilities toward God, toward other people, and even toward the environment. Humans are seen as trustees of creation.

Moderation—finding the middle path, avoiding extremes in all aspects of life. Not asceticism, not excess. Balance.

Now let me shift gears and talk about something closer to home, something that might feel more familiar.

The Canadian Unitarian Council has identified principles, and they're worth exploring, not just because we covenant and affirm them, but because they represent a different approach to ethics—one that's explicitly about *how* you live, not just *what* you believe.

First principle: Every person has inherent worth and dignity. Every person. No exceptions. Not because of what they've achieved or what they believe or how they behave. Inherent worth. That's the starting point.

Second: Justice, equity, and compassion should guide how we relate to each other. Be fair. Be kind. These should be the baseline for human relations.

Third: Accept one another and help each other grow spiritually. Support each other's journeys. Create communities where people can be themselves and develop.

Fourth: Everyone has the right to freely and responsibly search for truth and meaning. Question things. Explore. Doubt. Inquire. But do it responsibly—with humility, with openness to being wrong, with respect for others.

Fifth: Use your conscience and democratic processes in your community and society. Individual moral judgment *plus* collective decision-making. Neither pure individualism nor pure collectivism.

Sixth: Work toward a world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. Think globally. Recognize that your ethical obligations don't stop at your national borders.

Seventh: Respect the interdependent web of all existence. We're all connected—people, animals, ecosystems, everything. What you do ripples outward. You're part of this larger whole.

The big takeaway from these principles? How you live and engage with each other matters more than what you believe. It's about compassion, justice, responsibility, and recognizing we're all interconnected.

Now, these principles actually fit together remarkably well. They build from the individual outward in expanding circles of concern and action.

You start with individual dignity—that's the foundation. Then you move to just relationships between people. Then supportive community. Then you've got the method for how to engage with truth and meaning—free but responsible inquiry. Then it expands outward to democratic participation, to global justice, and finally situates everything in ecological context. It's not just philosophical—it requires practice . . . doing.

They're held together by one core insight that runs through all of them: interdependence requires both freedom and responsibility. Each person has worth—that's principle **one**—and we're all part of an interconnected web—that's principle **seven**. We're called to treat each other with justice, equity, and compassion—that's principle **two**—which directly flows from recognizing everyone's inherent dignity. Freedom of conscience exists—principle **five**—alongside the requirement that our search be responsible—principle **four**. Acceptance of others—principle **three**—comes with actively challenging discrimination and prejudice. And we're working toward a world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all—principle **six**—which extends our commitment to justice and compassion beyond our immediate circles to encompass all of humanity.

But yeah, there are some productive tensions here, and I want to be honest about them because I think the tensions are actually part of what makes this framework powerful.

What happens when someone's "free search for truth" leads them to beliefs that contradict justice and equity? Like, what if someone searches for truth and concludes that certain groups of people are inferior? The principles suggest that freedom has limits—it has to be responsible, it has to respect others' inherent worth. So there's a boundary.

Or consider democracy versus inherent rights. Principle **Five** values democratic processes—majority rule, collective decision-making. But principle **One** says every person has inherent dignity. So what happens when the majority votes to violate someone's dignity?

Some things aren't up for a vote. Human dignity isn't a matter for democratic decision. This reflects the fundamental tension in liberal democracy itself between majority rule and inalienable rights.

But here's the thing, and this is crucial: These tensions aren't bugs in the system—they're features. The framework is consistent precisely *because* it acknowledges these tensions exist. It's sophisticated enough to mirror the complexity of actual moral life.

The principles recognize that freedom without responsibility becomes harmful individualism. Justice without compassion becomes harsh judgment. Individual rights pursued without ecological awareness become destructive to the planet. Passive acceptance without active anti-oppression work just perpetuates injustice and lets harmful systems continue.

These principles check and balance each other. Your freedom to search for truth is limited by your responsibility to respect others' dignity. Your acceptance of others is enriched and deepened by encouraging their growth and transformation. Your individual worth is understood not in isolation but through interdependence—you matter because you're connected to this larger whole.

In the end, this isn't some simple, tension-free ideology that gives you easy answers. It's a sophisticated ethical framework that mirrors reality's complexity. It's consistent in acknowledging that moral life involves ongoing negotiation between competing goods that are all valuable—individual freedom and collective responsibility, personal liberty and social justice, acceptance and transformation, tradition and progress—all of it oriented toward love, justice, and the flourishing of everything and everyone that's interconnected.

And maybe that's the real point here, whether we're talking about ancient Greek cosmopolitanism, Kant's categorical imperative, Islamic ethics, Confucian harmony, India's constitutional pluralism, or Unitarian principles. Maybe we're never going to tie ethics up in a neat little bow with a perfect, universal system that everyone agrees on and that solves all moral dilemmas.

Maybe the work is in the wrestling itself. In the negotiating, in the trying to balance all these goods while keeping our eyes on what really matters: treating each other with dignity, working for justice, caring for the vulnerable, respecting the planet, and recognizing that we're all in this together.

Engaging with differing moral frameworks doesn't mean we have to compromise our core beliefs or fall into moral relativism. Instead, it encourages us to hold our principles with a sense of openness and humility, acknowledging the varying viewpoints in the world while still acting authentically. It's about clearly explaining our values in a way that is relatable, even to those who may not share them.

Because at the end of the day, our interconnection—that web that links all of us— isn't just a nice philosophical idea. It's reality. What happens in one part of the world affects the rest. Climate change, pandemics, economic crises, technological change—none of these respect borders. And so the search for common ethical ground, even if we never fully arrive, even if it remains frustratingly incomplete, might be the most important work we can do.

Not to impose one culture's values on everyone else. Not to pretend differences don't exist or don't matter. But to find enough common ground that we can face our shared challenges together, while respecting the beautiful, messy, complicated diversity of how human beings across the world understand what it means to live well.

