

Build Your Own Theology

By Pat Smith

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Are you a card carrying Unitarian Universalist? Do you have a copy of the seven Principles with you at all times? (Show a copy of the Principles.) If not, and if you are run over by a truck, how will the EMS crew be able to read them to you as part of your UU last rites? Well, if we did have last rites.

What I like about Unitarian Universalism is that we mostly use plain English and common words in our Principles. Words such as: *Search. Affirm. Justice. Peace. Encouragement.*

And these plain, English words are very powerful words. They are about action. And ideals. I think I understand them. And I like them.

But our Principles also use words that are not quite so straightforward. Words such as *covenant*, and *compassion*, and *spiritual growth*.

And these words are also very powerful. But maybe not as easy to understand.

The word *spiritual* makes me think of words like *grace*, and *forgiveness*, and *miracle*.

These, too, are powerful words. They have profound meaning to some people. They are used in special ways by other religions, other theologies. To us, they may evoke an emotional reaction. Maybe a negative emotional reaction.

(<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/theology>) Theology is “the study of religious faith, practice, and experience; *especially*: the study of God and of God's relation to the world.”

The second part is all about God— “the study of God and of God's relation to the world.”

The first part is much broader — “the study of religious faith, practice, and experience” As Unitarian Universalists, we study religious faith, practice, and experience. So we are all practicing theologians. You and I are theologians. And we continue to grow, theologically. We are not grown-ups, theologically. We are “growing-ups”, theologically. (*idea taken from Tom Owen-Towle “Theology Ablaze”, p 164*) Let me say that again. We are growing-ups, theologically. We are each in theological evolution (*Tom Owen-Towle, p 192*). We are each putting it all together. Trying to make it make sense. We can make the words work for us or against us. In 1936, the Commission on Appraisal of the American Unitarian Association said the following as part of its report. (*Report of the Commission on Appraisal to the AUA 1936 in Tom Owen-Towle p4 →*)

The genius of the Unitarian movement has been its power to adapt the vocabulary [the words] and practices of a religion whose roots are sunk deep into the past to new knowledge, new conditions, and new situations.

That's us! We need to do this. You and I. We UUs must **build our own theology**. We must make sense of what's gone before. Understand our roots. Where these words come from. So it's not up to me, thank goodness, or anyone, to define or redefine these words for you, so that you are comfortable with them. You are UU. You must figure it out. But that doesn't mean you are let loose to believe anything you want. No. We have our seven Principles and six sources. And we must test our thinking and be open and willing to change.

You are your own theologian. You have to figure it out. You have to **build your own theology**.

And it's not easy. It's hard.

That's why I like Intersections, our weekly Adult Religious Exploration. I've been building my own theology. For almost 10 years now. 10 years! Yeah. I'm slow. Testing my ideas through discussion with others. Learning to talk about those religious words. Understanding what they mean to those from other religions, as well as to other UUs.

Flip chart: Emotional Comfort Zone (vertical scale) – Most of the time we hear words in our comfort zone. We're happy. Then, someone uses a word that we are uncomfortable with. It's outside our comfort zone. And that causes anxiety. Sometimes lots of anxiety.

- *OOPS! Anxiety!! Or Challenge??*

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Time →

Do we try to move quickly back to our comfort zone, or do we see it as a challenge to incorporate into our own theology?

So let's take a look at a few of these words. Not all. Again, I cannot tell you what they should mean to you or how you should use them. But I will tell about my own discoveries in **building my theology**. I've struggled with these words. I've been told that UUs are the people of the struggle. You may have heard that when you learn a new word, you're

supposed to use it three times. Then it's yours. I take that to mean that if I use an uncomfortable word enough, I become comfortable with it. So that's the sort of thing I try to do.

Spiritual

This is a word that can sometimes cause anxiety. I've heard many UUs tell me they don't know what it means.

The word *spiritual* appears in our third principle: "Acceptance of one another and encouragement to *spiritual* growth in our congregations."

Since I've been at this church, I've heard various views about what should be in a Sunday service. Some of us want more *spirituality*. Some of us want less. I've visited other UU churches, some smaller than ours, some larger. And I've seen a variety of services. So the differing opinions are not something unique to our congregation. I've struggled with the word *spiritual*.

The Dalai Lama has a perspective on this. He says,

*(See p 22 in Dalai Lama "Ethics For the New Millennium" with words rearranged.)
Spirituality I take to be concerned with those qualities of the human spirit which bring happiness to both self and others. Things such as love and compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, a sense of responsibility, a sense of harmony. These[are] inner qualities [which] need not be directly connected to religious faith ...*

So if we affirm and promote the encouragement to "*spiritual* growth in our congregations", and apply what the Dalai Lama says, then we are encouraging the growth of love in our congregation, the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Lubbock. We are encouraging the growth of patience in our congregation, the growth of tolerance, and forgiveness, and contentment.

That makes sense to me. I've incorporated it into my UU theology.

The word contentment, for example, is not a "mind" thing, an intellectual idea. Sure it has a dictionary definition. But for me, contentment is a feeling. Something I sense. Later in the service, we are going to sing the hymn, "Wake Now My Senses". (<http://www.uua.org/ga/2011/business/184322.shtml>→) The words were written by Unitarian Universalist minister Thomas Mikelson. The tune is a traditional Irish melody and calls us to wake up to the potential of this beautiful new day. [So] We not only need to use our mind, but come to our senses! (Tom Owen-Towle p145)

Eyes, and ears, and mouth, and nose, and fingers, and toes! Remember? Rita Chamblin sang it a couple of weeks ago.

(Tim Kreider, Dallas Morning News, June 26, 2011, rearranged)

Learning how to transform mere ignorance into mystery [is a useful skill], [Learning how to transform] simple “not knowing” into wonder, is a useful skill. Because it turns out that the most important things in this life [are things we’re never going to know] — why the universe is here instead of not, what happens to us when we die, how the people we love really feel about us — [These] are things we’re never going to know.

That sounds *spiritual* to me. And I like it. So if someone asks me, “Are you *spiritual*?”, I can say yes, thinking of my own definition of what it means.

Since the word *spiritual* is in our third principle, it’s already a part of our UU theology.

What does *spiritual* mean to you? Have you built it into your theology?

Compassion

What about the word *compassion*? Is this inside or outside your comfort zone. I thought I knew what it meant. But now I’m revising my thinking. As UUs do.

Recall that *compassion* was one of the words mentioned by the Dalai Lama in describing *spirituality*.

Compassion appears in our second principle: “Justice, equity and *compassion* in human relations.”

We might start with empathy. But then we need to go further.

Tom Owen-Towle (p 156) says that “compassion . . . is *suffering with*. It denotes participation in the anguish of our brother or sister.” Here is an example he gives of being a comforter.

(Tom Owen-Towle p157, Unitarian Universalist religious educator and minister, Elizabeth Strong, illustrates the call to be a comforter with the following inspirational exchange.)

A little girl was coming home and explained to concerned parents that she had encountered her friend who had broken her favorite doll on the sidewalk. “And you stopped to help her pick up the pieces?” her father inquired. “Oh no, Dad, I stopped and helped her cry!”

Dr. Karen Armstrong is a highly regarded expert on religion. She believes that *compassion* means applying the Golden Rule: Don't treat others in a way that you would not like to be treated. She emphasizes that *compassion* is not pity or feeling sorry for someone. And it's not "touchy-feely." *Compassion* is dethroning ourselves and putting another there.

Jesus gave an example of who our neighbor is by telling the story of the good Samaritan. And he uses the word *compassion*.

[Luke 10:30–37]:

A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who both stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. By chance a certain priest was going down that way. When he saw him, he passed by on the other side. In the same way a Levite also, when he came to the place, and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he traveled, came where he was. When he saw him, he was moved with compassion, came to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. He set him on his own animal, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, and gave them to the host, and said to him, 'Take care of him. Whatever you spend beyond that, I will repay you when I return.' Now which of these three do you think seemed to be a neighbor to him who fell among the robbers?

Martin Luther King, Jr. talked about the Golden Rule and the Good Samaritan in a speech he gave the day before he was shot and killed. He added a different perspective.

[\(http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/ive_been_to_the_mountain_top/\)](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/ive_been_to_the_mountain_top/)

It's possible that those men [who passed by] were afraid. You see, the Jericho Road is a dangerous road. ... I remember when Mrs. King and I were first in Jerusalem. We rented a car and drove from Jerusalem down to Jericho. ... And as soon as we got on that road I said to my wife, "I can see why Jesus used this as the setting for his parable." It's a winding, meandering road. ... It's really conducive for ambushing. ... In the days of Jesus it came to be known as the "Bloody Pass." And you know, it's possible that the priest and the Levite looked over [at] that man on the ground and wondered if the robbers were still around. ... Or it's possible that they felt that the man on the ground was merely faking ..., and he was acting like he had been robbed and hurt in order to lure them there for quick and easy seizure. ... And so the first question that the priest asked, the first question that the Levite asked was, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" ...

But then the Good Samaritan came by, and he reversed the question: "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?" (emphasis added)

So, that gives you some ideas about *compassion*, a word in our third principle. It's already in our UU theology.

What does *compassion* mean to you? Build it into your theology.

Covenant

Is this outside your comfort zone?

The word *covenant* appears at the beginning of the original version of our statement of Principles. The beginning of your hymnal, right before hymn #1, gives the seven principles and the original five sources of our faith. A sixth source was added in 1995.

It begins: "We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, *covenant* to affirm and promote:"

The word *covenant* was dropped in 1995, I believe, but I don't know why.

(<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/covenant>) A *covenant* is a written agreement or promise usually under seal between two or more parties especially for the performance of some action.

So the seven principles are actions that UUA congregations promise each other. A promise to affirm and promote these principles. And we should be accountable if we break that promise.

And remember that a *covenant* is a promise, not a creed. UU congregations are *covenantal* communities. We are not creedal faith communities.

In our new member ceremony, we use the words "commitment" and "promise".

We share a common commitment to build True Community. We promise to respect and help one another, and to support this church through service. Our promises bind us together.

In our Board of Trustees transition ceremony, new Board members make pledges and promises, and they affirm a "covenant: to love, respect and encourage each other."

(*ideas from Victoria Weinstein, UUA GA 2011*) A *covenant* is a statement of how we want to be together. And it's not an intellectual exercise. It's emotional, from the heart. *Covenants* in congregations, such as a *covenant* of right relations or a religious *covenant* must be internalized. And the process for its development is important and necessary.

(GA 2011 #2077) We build a *covenant* so we know how to talk to each other in the good times, so we can get through the bad times.

Last fall I attended a conflict resolution workshop, sponsored by the Southwest UU district. The instructor gave an example of the value of a congregational *covenant*. If there were disputes in her congregation resulting in anger and unwillingness to work through difficulties, she could point to one of the promises on the *covenant*, and say, “We are in violation of this. We need to change our behaviors and actions to hold to the promises we made to each other in the agreement.”

Even though the word *covenant* is no longer incorporated in the introduction to our seven Principles, it is in our vocabulary.

What does it mean to you? Have you built it into your own theology?

I’ve talked about three words that we have in our Principles. There are other words we sometimes trip over that are not in our Principles. Words that might give us anxiety. Words that might make us want to get back to our comfort zone as quickly as possible. Or maybe they provide us with a challenge to incorporate them into our own UU theology. I’ll talk about three: *grace*, *forgiveness*, and *miracle*.

The good news is that you do not have to have a theology about them. But it helps. Because they are used often by many people. I’ll tell you what I think about them. Then you think about what you think about them.

Grace

Grace is maybe one of those anxiety words. And it’s a word I’ve become comfortable with. I have a UU theology about *grace*. *Grace* can be thought of as a state of kindness towards someone. If I am kind to someone, they are receiving my *grace*. And if they are kind to me, I am receiving their *grace*. It is given freely. It’s not earned. That’s one way I think about *grace*

I also think of serving our church with *grace*. Serving on the Board of Trustees, or on a committee, or volunteering for a specific task, such as pulling weeds from the flower bed. Serving not with resentment, or regret. But with heart and joy. With *grace*.

What do you think about it? What is your theology about *grace*?

Forgiveness

Where is that on your anxiety scale?

Forgiveness is a harder word for me.

([Oxford English Dictionary](#)) *Forgiveness* means 'to grant free pardon and to give up all claim on account of an offense or debt'.

So, *forgiving* a debt means we don't make someone pay back a loan. We give up our claim to that debt.

Now, what about *forgiving* an offense? A person?

In practical terms, it may be necessary for the offender to offer some form of acknowledgment, [apology](#) or restitution, or even just ask for *forgiveness*...([Wikipedia](#))

In Christianity, I ask God for *forgiveness*. I've done that before. I was by myself. I looked up at the sky. I said a few words. I asked God for *forgiveness*. It was pretty easy.

Now, later in my life, with my own UU theology, *forgiveness* is not granted by God. *Forgiveness* is granted to me by another person. Another person I have offended or wronged in some way. I may need to ask for *forgiveness* from that person. Or I may be *forgiven* without asking.

So in my UU theology, it's another person who *forgives* me. Not God. And in my UU theology, *forgiveness* is hard. Very hard. I must ask another person for *forgiveness*. Another person. Face to face. That's really really hard!! Maybe I could do it on the phone. I wouldn't have to look them in the eye. Maybe not even talk to the person, but call when I know they are out and just leave a message. Or better yet, send an email. No, I better ask for *forgiveness*, face to face. In person.

Building my own theology, and living up to it, especially *forgiveness*, is not easy. How do you think about *forgiveness*? Is it part of your theology yet?

Miracles

What about the word *miracle*? Are you comfortable with that word? The Bible is full of *miracles*. They are in the Old Testament. They are in the New Testament. They are in the Koran. At least, there are many happenings reported as *miracles*. ([Wikipedia](#) →) For many, a *miracle* is an event attributed to divine intervention. In Hinduism, a *miracle* is a supernatural thing.

([Wikipedia](#) →) In my own theology, which does not include a deity, a *miracle* might be considered beating the odds, a statistically unlikely but beneficial event. Some [coincidences](#) may be perceived to be *miracles*. Or it might simply be a "wonderful" occurrence, regardless of likelihood, such as a birth.

I like that example. A birth.

My third grandchild was born just a few weeks ago. To me, it was a *miracle*. Looking at all his ten fingers and ten toes. Each hand had a thumb. And each foot had a big toe. And in the right place. All *miracles*! He had one ear on each side of his head. Another *miracle*! He had two eyes that he opened on his first day. And his pupils moved together! A *miracle*!

*Head and shoulders knees and toes, knees and toes.
Head and shoulders knees and toes, knees and toes.
Eyes and ears and mouth and nose.
Head and shoulders knees and toes, knees and toes.*

We might think of a *miracle* as something we do not understand. Certainly, those in ancient times thought of them that way. Anything that could not be explained was a *miracle*. I cannot explain all the biology of my grandson. As the King of Siam would say, "Is a puzzlement." To me, "Is a *miracle*."

That's how I think of a *miracle*.

What's your theology about *miracles*? Have you built it?

Let's look at our first principle. Tom Owen-Towle says

(Tom Owen-Towle p96)

*Believing in the inherent worth and dignity of every person means that, on the whole, ...[we] possess sufficient capacity of mind (*gesture*) and heart (*gesture*) to make our own good decisions rather than turning our souls over to some guru, however bright or charming. The Buddha put it plainly: "Be a lamp unto yourself."*

You are your own theologian. You have to figure it out. You have to **build your own theology.**

We UUs are not allowed to say, "I was just following orders." Give me the list of sins, and I will avoid them. Or try.

No. We UUs must build our own theology. And there's more. We must put our thoughts to the test. We must allow others to hear our reasoning and critique our logic. We must be open to changing our ideas.

And the good news is that as UUs, we are allowed to do that. To change, based on new evidence. Here is a verse from the musical “The King and I”, sung by the King.

(<http://www.stlyrics.com/lyrics/thekingandi/apuzzlement.htm>)

*When my father was a king
He was a king who knew exactly what he knew,
And his brain was not a thing
Forever swinging to and fro and fro and to.
Shall I, then be like my father
And be willfully unmovable and strong?
Or is it better to be right?...
Or am I right when I believe I may be wrong?*

In his first [UUA] General Assembly address (1979) President Pickett challenged UUs to a staunch commitment to theological pluralism. (*Tom Owen-Towle p 9*)

Let us provide an atmosphere in which those among us of all theological persuasions—the Christians, the humanists, the existentialists—may fully explore and boldly express their worldviews without defensiveness, [without] belligerence, or [without] dogmatism. For too long, pluralism as a value has received our lip service. Now let pluralism become at last a real source of our vitality and strength. Ours will never be one world, but many. Let them be spoken with confidence and vigor. By rights, ours ought to be the richest theological milieu of any denomination in modern experience.

And why should we have the richest theological mix? Because everyone builds their own theology.

You are your own theologian. Build your own theology.

You want a theology? Go out and build it!