

Our society pretends to celebrate entrepreneurs, freethinkers, trailblazers. But a more critical observation sees that society only celebrates rulebreakers after they've succeeded, never before. Never when they're in the process of challenging the rules. But in action, in decree, and in enforcement, today's societies despise square pegs, the challengers, the troublemakers — the very same people it pretends to cherish.

Unitarians and Universalists were originally defined by our rejection the doctrine of hell and trinity... Today, I will talk about privacy, and show how privacy is intimately entangled with these renegade values at the core of our Unitarian Universalist faith.

Let's begin with our fourth principle:

As a faith tradition, Unitarian Universalism makes sacred the right and responsibility to engage in a free and responsible quest as an act of religious devotion. We cannot abide by the suffocation we feel in our souls when someone else dictates to us how to believe, what to think about the important questions, or even where to look to find the answers.

Sarah once commented that she loves our community of faith because we are just and fair, we don't tell each other what to believe, we don't tell each other what not to believe. Heather pulled me through that door because she wanted something sacred in our lives. We stayed because there was nothing here that that offend our spirit. But for Sarah we need something more, more than just not being offended, for Sarah sake, we need a reason to stay.

A search for truth and meaning has an almost desperate longing to it, Emerson warns that "what we are worshipping we are becoming." Unitarian Universalism needs to be more than cherry picking what we like, what's pretty and appealing, and avoiding the inevitably troubling or demanding aspects of our spiritual growth.

For me, religious freedom isn't about being able to chart in any direction. It's about being free to chart the course that has always been part of me.

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Mindfulness, divine inspiration, genuine awareness, getting to that space requires that we distance ourselves from our desires, as well as the roles in which we find ourselves, and the norms by which we are guided. To get to where we can ask ourselves, "What is of my spirit in all of this?" "Where is my spirit in the path that lies before me?" It is the ability to get outside of ourselves that allows us to become open to the possibilities of the mysteries of existence.

According to Pausanias, at the temple of Apollo in Delphi - where a priestess served as the oracle of the gods - pilgrims would pause in the forecourt to ponder the inscription "gnothi seauton", "Know thyself". It seems that before one can hear the message of the gods, you must know who and what you are.

We are heading toward a time when devices will keep us terminally in touch. To an increasing degree, our capacity for self-awareness is defined in part by what these widely used technologies allow, and by exactly how they allow it. I believe that the resulting changes in our culture, our community, even our spirit are more dramatic and permanent than we are allowing ourselves to imagine.

Yet in another, more profound way, we are also terminally out of touch. As our opportunities for genuine and constructive aloneness are being pulled away, we are losing a path to our authentic selves. In "Silence: The Power of Quiet in a World Full of Noise", Thich Nhat Hanh wrote

"To fully experience this life as a human being,  
we all need to connect with our desire to realize  
something larger than our individual selves."

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When we lived in California, I often saw evangelical bumper stickers and billboards proclaiming "John 3:16", frankly, I don't get it. Instead my mind wanders, wondering which Bible verse would I be moved to post. Today, let's try Luke 5:16 "And He withdrew Himself into the wilderness and prayed."

Of the books of the bible, I find Job to be the most comfortable. The Book of Job is a renegade, God speaks from the whirlwind, clearly defining that suffering not a form of divine punishment. Such a Unitarian notion, God is not vengeful. Both the righteous and the wicked suffer, everybody dies, it is all part of human flourishing. By contrast I find Luke to be the most challenging. Luke is the Gospel of a life of prayer, prayer as piety, humility, repentance and forgiveness — prayer is seen more often in Luke than in all the other gospels combined. Luke challenges me because, prayer challenges me. Some people cannot sail, they just can't connect with the wind, the problem is placing trust in something you cannot see.

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Have you ever Googled your own name, if you Google Adam Clarke on the internet you will find an early methodist luminary from Northern Ireland. Adam Clarke's Commentaries on the Bible are everywhere. We certainly have our differences, but wow, his definition of prayer blew my mind:

“Prayer is not designed to inform God,  
but to give man a sight of his misery;  
to humble man's heart,  
to excite his desire,  
to inflame his faith,  
to animate his hope,  
to raise his soul from earth to heaven...”

you know, the worst part about being wrong about something important, is that until that shattering moment of discovery, it feels exactly the same as being right.

But back to Luke Chapter 5, Jesus had just healed the leper, and was about to engage the multitudes, Jesus had only thirty years to establish a lasting connection between God and all of humanity, events are pressing, time is running out, every moment matters&mdsh; "And He withdrew Himself into the wilderness and prayed." In Luke, the miracles, the multitudes, even the dawn of the Christen movement are merely the setting, "And He withdrew Himself into the wilderness and prayed." Luke makes a point of repeatedly guiding us to learn that Jesus prayed in private. Why?

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Some of you may know that I am a privacy advocate, after Sarah started at school, I became aware that the Central Okanagan Public Schools are failing in their duty to protect our children's privacy, and I have come to believe that their public surveillance campaign systematically overreaches their authority. To them, my message is simple, Central Okanagan Public Schools must always observe our Provincial Laws exactly as they are written.

Mystics and teachers from many faith traditions have extolled the importance of our advocaries as catalysts for personal transformation and growth. Such adversaries force us to focus on the least developed or most problematic tendencies in our psyches. Yaqui sorcerer Don Juan tells his apprentice Carlos Castaneda "We know that nothing can temper the spirit of a warrior as much as the challenge of dealing with impossible people in positions of power. Only under these conditions can warriors aquire the sobriety and serenity to stand the pressure of the unknowable." Dealing with such figures not only curbs our sence of self-importance, but cultivates such qualities as self-control, will, patience, teaching us the proper use of personal energy as well as how to move beyond it.

At first, advocacy is about making people feel uncomfortable with the status quo, being irratating, holding up an unflattering mirror, embarassing authority, mobilizing shame. But then comes another, quieter, more spiritual side to advocacy, advocacy is also about nurturing, nourishing, encouraging, to help people be more mindful of different ways of framing who they are and what they do. For me, successful advocacy is not so much about pushing my ideas into someone else, it is about helping my adversary understand that protecting privacy is actually what they want to do in the first place.

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1977, the Apple Computer Company is incorporated, Star Wars opens in cinemas, TCP/IP, the internet protocol is first tested, and a group of students attend an original play at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. "The Archbishop's Ceiling", had a profound impact on me, I am still haunted by Arther Millar's debate about the nature of our reality, and the spectre of a world where pervasive surveillance dissolves community and morality into mere performance.

Lack of privacy means reduced scope for self-making. Privacy does not negate social shaping, the point of privacy is to ensure that the development of our spirit and the development of community values do not proceed in lockstep. Privacy is a kind of tolerance, ensuring play in the joints, it give us the flexibility to sieze the moment, and be something other than than what is expected.

There is a connection between privacy and the development of our authentic Unitarian Universalist faith. Gnothi Seauton, still applies, to know God, we still have to know ourselves. Our mysteries flourish in the interplay between emergence of spirit, and the shapings of our community of faith. Privacy helps maintain the gaps we need between these forces, fostering growth, enabling change, supporting those things that are important, but never be shared.

"Privacy is a value so complex, so entangled in competing and contradictory dimensions, so engorged with various and distinct meanings, that I sometimes despair whether it can be usefully addressed at all." — Philosopher Robert Post

Still, the term is remarkably resilient. Despite the fact that no one can yet supply a precise and commonly accepted definition, privacy carries a broad cultural and transnational appeal. As Unitarians, we can draw parallels between our faith and privacy, both are very real, and both elude distillation to an essential core. Perhaps we just don't have the right words yet, or the necessary frame of mind, or perhaps it is simply enough that their presence in our lives gives us comfort, and that we can dread a life without them.

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There is no word for privacy in Russian, or in Chinese, which I think contributes to some of the differences between our societies. Communities without rulebreakers, cannot test new rules - the status quo, the established consensus, that remains fixed. Please take a moment, and put on the mantle of a surveillance society, feel community dissolving away, the constriction of doctrine. While you do, I will recite Macbeth's Last Soliloquy, in Act 5, Scene 5:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
To the last syllable of recorded time;  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.

That's enough, everyone back to our sanctuary, and be grateful we have alternatives. But before we move on, consider that if today's mass surveillance had been in place in the 1970s, homosexuality would still be illegal, and people could be found criminal from birth. For who would dare stand up and protest while law enforcement was cracking down on organized crime? That's how the Toronto Bathhouses had been classified: organized crime. It wasn't Gay Pride that was in error, it was that hideous metric. Gay Pride got that definition changed, and because of it, our society grew more tolerant, and we all become a little better.

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When we seek real change,  
when we seek truth,  
when we seek to connect with the eternal,

Intimacy and vulnerability have always been entangled,  
within ourselves,  
with our partners,  
with our God,

we seek a place,  
where we have no face,  
no other,  
no outside,

to get there,  
and to safely return,  
we will always need our privacy.