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Looking Ahead: UU Principles in the 21st Century

For most of us, these last few weeks have been a time of great intensity; a time of emotional highs and lows. I know that I became an obsessive poll watcher in the weeks leading up to the election – optimistic one moment, predicting doom the next. As usual, the elections brought mixed feelings. There was sorrow that Proposition 8 passed, although the race was tight. Make no mistake; this was a huge setback in the struggle for equal rights for all people. Throughout California, Unitarian Universalists worked hard to retain the right of gays and lesbians to marry – a right that the California Supreme Court held to be a “fundamental right” in the California Constitution. But it is clear that this is far from the end of the struggle. 18,000 couples got married before election day. Our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters will continue to work for their essential rights; if anything they and their straight allies were energized by this defeat. This afternoon, I will be meeting with a group of GLBT leaders in Tuolumne County for a discussion about what comes next.

And then there was the emotional high of the national presidential election. Whoever you were for, you had to be aware that we were witnessing an important moment in the history of America. An African-American – a black man named Barack Hussein Obama – had been elected president. As I watched the crowds dancing and singing and hugging in Grant Park in Chicago, tears filled my eyes. And I started to sob in a way I hadn’t cried for years. This was something I hadn’t expected to see in my lifetime. This was a momentous event in our history – an event that carries the potential to be transformative; to change our course; to move us in a new direction. And, trite as it sounds, it was a moment filled with hope!

Barack Obama’s election holds the potential to be one of those moments in history that bring about transformation. One of those moments when the world shifts a bit on its axis; when we can see the arc of the universe bending just a little more toward justice. And yet, you have to wonder -- why does anyone even want to be president? This time in our history is filled with perils and pitfalls, and with very real danger. The country and the world are in a state of crisis, and the challenges are huge: a financial meltdown that threatens jobs, savings, and homes; two foreign wars with no signs of ending; a serious health care crisis; chronic dependence on fossil fuels for energy; and the ever-greater challenge posed by global climate change, to name just a few. Barack Obama and a new administration can’t solve all these crises on their own. Democracy is hard work, and we will have to play an active role in working on these issues. A new President Obama is going to need us to provide cover for him; he will need us to watch his back. There will be times when we will have to show that he is under pressure from an active, caring constituency. He will never be able to please all the people; many will be angry. Sometimes we will be angry. But we need to provide vocal support for crucial reforms that we know to be needed – serious economic reform that includes jobs, investment in infrastructure, relief for homeowners as well as bankers; serious progress on reducing carbon emissions and dependence on fossil fuels; a health care system that provides decent care for all our people, and so on.

So, what about us as Unitarian Universalists? What can we offer the country and the world, as we grapple with the problems we face? A good place to start is by looking to our UU Principles. (I should note that efforts are currently underway to revise our seven principles. You can find the proposed revisions at the UUA website and in the current issue of *UU World*). Our principles give us an ethical focus for living in the world, and they provide us with standards by which to measure world events and the policies that shape them.

Our reading this morning was from an important new book -- *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of this World for Crucifixion and Empire*. In it, the authors argue that for roughly its first millennium, Christianity was focused on following the example of Jesus of Nazareth. They read his life and teachings as urging humans to work toward discovering and claiming a state of paradise in this world. The Eucharist, or communion was a joyous expression of community, not a reenactment of Jesus' death. Shedding human blood was a serious sin. Participation in war was seen as evil, and soldiers were required to do penance. As the empire sought to expand its reach, and as it began to fear Islamic encroachments in the Holy Land, it began to justify violence and killing as doing God's will. Indeed, going as a Crusader to fight in Jerusalem provided a short cut to salvation. And theology changed as well to a focus on the bloody death of Jesus on the cross as God's ultimate sacrifice to wash away humanity's sinfulness.

The authors, Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker (who is the president of Starr King School, the UU seminary in Berkeley), contend that we need to reverse this emphasis on paradise in the next life. Instead, we need to reclaim a perspective that emphasizes paradise in this life. Going back to our principles, it is important that we rediscover hope, that we arrive at this paradise that is present before us – in this life – and respond to it with lives devoted to justice and caring for this world. We need to reenter this world as “sacred space,” loving life fiercely, and working, with love, to preserve and protect the goodness of our intricate web of life. Paradise is not free of suffering or conflict, but is a place where the spirit is present and love is possible. Reclaiming paradise in this world means restoring to human life its divinely inspired dignity and worth; and it means developing our capacity for wisdom, love, nonviolence, and responsible, ethical use of power. We can taste, see, and feel glimpses of paradise in our ordinary lives. But we experience paradise most fully when we worship together as a community, building ethical relationships, and working to end oppression and injustice.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are called to spread the message that we work to discover and to claim the existence of paradise in this life. So, let's look to our seven principles to see what guidance they give us in doing this work. Our first principle is that we affirm and promote “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” And our second principle calls on us to affirm “justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.” One of the first tasks under a new administration is to return to the rule of law. Our image in the world has lost so much of its luster over the last eight years. UUs must insist that we renounce, once and for all, the use of torture, and not play semantic games to get around it. We need to close the prisons at Guantanamo, Bagram, Abu Ghraib, and other places around the world. We need to abjure the practice of rendition, in which suspects are shipped to a twilight world of secret bases to be tortured. We need to stop spying on

fellow Americans. In short, we need to revert to the principles on which this country was founded, including our commitment to justice and the rule of law.

Respecting the inherent worth and dignity of every person requires that we renew our commitment to caring for all members of this society. We are in the midst of an economic meltdown, in which the middle class is starting to sink from sight. We need to ensure an adequate supply of jobs, we need to ensure that people are able to renegotiate the terms of their mortgages so that they can remain in their homes; we need to re-constitute a safety net that ensures support for all our people. And we need, at long last, to adopt a system of health care that ensures access for all. Believe me, there is little sense of worth and dignity among those who have to rely on the emergency room as their only source of medical care. As Unitarian Universalists, we need to continue to support struggles for equal rights for all. This means continuing to struggle against systems of oppression wherever they occur, including oppression of racial and ethnic minorities, and oppression of our GLBT brothers and sisters.

Another of our principles calls on us to honor “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” Unitarian Universalists have always put reason foremost in our religious practice. We need to be advocates for rebuilding our educational system to its former levels. Once, we had the finest schools in the world, and we pledged to provide a quality education for every child. We have let our educational system slip into mediocrity, and we need to devote to it the resources necessary restore its greatness. Among other things, this means treating our teachers with the dignity and respect they deserve, because they are the ones charged with caring for our children. And, our commitment to a “free and responsible search for truth and meaning,” means that we must insist on restoring science to a place of respect. Over the past eight years, we have witnessed repeated cases in which sound science was overridden by bureaucrats to serve political interests.

We are enmeshed in two foreign wars of occupation; wars that have cost many American lives and billions of dollars, and that have made the lives of the inhabitants of those countries a living hell. Yet another of our principles calls on us to support “the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.” In a manner reminiscent of the violence of the 11th Century crusades, we have chosen to act unilaterally in the world, invoking the doctrine of “preemptive war” to challenge regimes we happen not to like. Some 60 years ago, the goal of world community was heralded in San Francisco with the creation of the United Nations. However imperfect, the UN remains a channel for the creation and fostering of world community. The International Court of Justice represents an attempt at a world-wide rule of law. These institutions are worthy of our support. In the coming years, UUs must insist that the US renounce the path of unilateral action, particularly military action, and return to systems of diplomacy, negotiation, and cooperation. We may still need to use military force, but we should never do so except after consultation and cooperation with other nations around the world. ‘

Our dependence on fossil fuels has led us to make devil’s bargains with reactionary regimes around the world to keep the oil flowing. As we move into the 21st Century, we need to use every means at our disposal to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels, and our dependence on foreign oil. We need to renounce the shedding of blood to secure the availability of oil to fuel our system.

And then there's our Seventh Principle – "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part." In deceptively simple wording, it lays out a world view that calls on us to do nothing less than to work to rediscover paradise, right here, right now. In fact, if we truly lived with an awareness of the interdependent web, we would find the solutions to all the crises facing us. We would take care of the earth, and we would take care of each other. The 7th Principle emphasizes the importance of relationship, of community. It is a statement about our commitment to caring for the Earth, us, yes. But note that it also refers to the interdependent web "of which we are a part." So it does not treat humans as separate from nature. It makes the statement that "we are all in this together" – animals, plants, trees, oceans, and rivers, and humans too. The noted UC Berkeley sociologist Robert Bellah, when speaking at our General Assembly several years ago, said that he thought our 7th principle should be our first principle, i.e., that our emphasis needs to be on community, on our dependence on one another, rather than on individualism.

Our 7th principle suggests how we should relate to our ecological crisis and to the threat of global climate change. We need to protect our planet home, not as some abstract concept of preserving nature, but because our very survival depends on caring for the ecosystems we inhabit. But the 7th principle also tells us that we need to care for one another. All the crises we face are addressed by the 7th principle. If we are interconnected, how can we countenance torture of other human beings? How can we countenance lawlessness? And if we are interconnected, how can we use violence and killing unilaterally to get our way in the world? How can we mindlessly continue to rely on fossil fuels, causing wars, and fouling our atmosphere?

So, as our 7th Principle tells us, we really are interconnected. And if we act out of our sense of interconnectedness, we can see how we have to change our thinking if we are to solve the many problems facing us. The idea of paradise in this life, put forward by Brock and Parker, shows how we might change our thinking. We can never rely on just one event, or one person – however gifted – for our "salvation." We can follow the example of great leaders, but ultimately the work is up to us. Following our guiding principles, we come to know the world as paradise when we come together in loving community. Our hearts and souls are reborn when we undertake the task of living rightly with one another and the earth. When we follow the pathways of generosity, nonviolence, and care for one another, our awareness is transformed. This is not a Utopian vision; indeed it is the only practical path. For too long, we have followed the paths of greed, materialism, selfishness, violence, and fear. And look where they have gotten us – into a series of deep global crises.

So, as Brock and Parker tell us, we need to embrace a spiritual and religious perspective that does not locate salvation in some future end point. We need to work to create paradise right here, right now, in this world of struggle. With newly found hope, we can arrive at a paradise that is present before us, and we can respond to it with lives devoted to justice and caring for the world. We can reenter this world as "sacred space," when we love life fiercely, and when we work, with love, to preserve and protect the goodness of our intricate web of life. We can feast in paradise when we open our hearts to our sadness, to our grief for all that has been lost and cannot be repaired. We recommit ourselves to finding paradise in this world when we remember the fullness of life that is possible when we open our hearts to love. We work at re-discovering

paradise, when we encounter each other in our communities with compassion and love, when we celebrate our life-affirming rituals, when we open ourselves to beauty.