

“Free and Responsible”

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My grandparents on both sides were Methodists. On one side, they were fairly active in the church their whole lives. My grandad even taught religion in high school, which I believe meant he taught Christianity. He would implore me to read bible stories. They are good stories, he would say. Grandad didn't say that they were true stories. He didn't say that they were the only good stories. But bible stories were the only stories that he implored me to read. My granny's relationship with the church seemed to be primarily about community. She liked getting together on Sundays with good people. On the other side of my family, my grandparents gave no sign that they were interested in church. Perhaps they stopped going as soon as they had the choice.

Many people come to Unitarian congregations from other traditions. Perhaps they love religious community, but the one they grew up in didn't do it for them. Maybe the stories they learned were good stories, but not the only good stories. Perhaps some of the lessons they were taught did not fit with what their own conscience said. And so many of us are here because we did not accept the religion that was handed to us. The religion handed down to us wasn't broad enough, and it was sometimes wrong. We have as a core value that we need to do our own discernment. We are driven to do a free search for truth and meaning, not to accept what we are told. We are driven to do a free search for truth and meaning, not a search limited to one source. As Unitarians, we place a high value on thinking for ourselves and finding our own way. In the 1970s, it was even common for our children's programs to teach about a variety of world religions, but not mention our own Unitarian principles. Parents didn't want to impose their views on their children, so they didn't mention their views. They showed their kids many different views, and encouraged a free search for truth and meaning. What truth could we find in Buddhism, paganism, humanism, Judaism, Sufism, and on and on. So much searching to do, and we searched and searched and searched.

As Mick Jagger said, I'm free, to do what I want, free to sing my song, not the song that was handed down to me. Freedom, oh freedom, yes freedom, cry freedom. So many jokes about how free Unitarians are when we change light bulbs. Freedom, freedom, freedom, freedom, freedom.

But there is a problem: We have a limited view of what to do with our freedom. We don't know what we don't know. Just like my grandparents grew up with Methodism, I grew up with 1980s pop music. I didn't love it, but it was okay. I didn't feel the need to run from it and find something else. I didn't know what the song The Reflex was about, and wouldn't have vouched for it in debate, but it was on the radio and that was good enough. But when I discovered Pink Floyd, it was like my eyes opened up to a whole new world. Youth protest music. The dark side of the moon. A floating rainbow prism in outer space. It was bold and mysterious. I thought that Pink Floyd was the best band in the world. So different from everyone else. They were outside of the box. Little did I know how far inside the box I was, and how much more there was outside of the box.

When the movie *Stand By Me* came out, I discovered 1950s pop music. When I dropped out of school and went hitchhiking out west, I discovered Bob Marley, sung around campfires. Singing about redemption! I found out about indigenous chanting, in many varieties. I discovered the richness of music that is created in the moment while being with people who are dancing with abandon. I discovered how erotic Beethoven's piece *Fur Elise* can be when you remember that it was written for a lover and not a typewriter.

We are surrounded by so much, but we don't always see it, even if we think we are free.

In the mid-1800s, Unitarian minister Theodore Parker said, "Look at the facts of the world. You see a continual and progressive triumph of the right [by right, he meant good]. I do not pretend to understand the moral universe, the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways...But from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice." As far as Parker could see, things were getting better. Parker says, in the same paragraph, that the injustices of slavery needed to be made right, he was aware of that problem. But apparently he didn't see problems with the continuing genocide of First Nations people or the continuing expansion of colonialism. Theodore Parker acknowledged that he had a limited view, but even so he underestimated how much he didn't know.

We can have a limited view not just as individuals but as a community. The author Eric Hoffer says that when people are free to do as they please, they usually imitate each other. The Society of Nonconformists doesn't realize that they are all wearing the same style of clothing. Alternative music becomes, not music that is outside the box, but music that is in a box labelled 'alternative music', as boxed in as the music it was trying to escape. As Unitarians, we need to be ever vigilant that, in our freedom, we are not boxing ourselves in.

To summarize: We want the freedom to search for truth and meaning, but we have a limited view, so we can't search as freely as we'd like.

So how can we see beyond our horizons? How can we see beyond our paradigm? How do we see outside of our Overton window? The Overton window is the window of conceivable beliefs. How do we see outside of our Overton window?

Imagine you are a Greek grandmother in the 1980s, and your grandchild brings home their new partner. Your grandchild says, "My partner is vegetarian. Can you feed us something vegetarian?" "What does it mean to be a vegetarian," you ask. "It means we don't eat meat. Can you feed us something else." You think for a moment, and then your eyes brighten up. "Lamb! We'll have lamb!" This sad tale has happened far too often. But we don't have to frame it as a sad tale, because it can have a happy ending. "Oh, vegetarians don't eat lamb? Thank you for telling me. I'll go google 'vegetarian' now so that I can learn more." We can get outside of our paradigm by having new people in our lives, expanding our Overton window, and taking responsibility for learning more.

Without picking on men, I'll say this to men: There are things about you that every woman in the room sees, that you don't know about. You can get beyond your paradigm simply by opening up to the other points of view in the room, with curiosity rather than defensiveness.

We talked in my last sermon about potlucks. Go to potlucks that weren't made for you. As Unitarians, we can be gung-ho at doing this, trying out new rituals and traditions from other cultures. Too often, though, we do it as tourists rather than as novices. Get outside your paradigm, go where other people

are at the centre. Go with humility. Go with openness. Go as a newborn. We can get so used to riding up and down the elevators of our lives that we can forget that there is a staircase, another way to move through the world. As we ride our elevators, we can forget that there are other paradigms, other contexts, other ways of being.

Continually make the choice to see beyond your horizon, by putting other people at the centre.

In addition to our UU principles, we have 6 UU sources, 6 sources to draw from so that we are not trapped within our own paradigms. These sources include the universe itself, which we can experience with awe and wonder; words and deeds of prophetic people; world religions; humanist teachings; earth-centred ways of being. So many ways to expand our horizons. But these 6 sources, which are meant to challenge us, can become a source of comfort and familiarity. We commune with the universe, we quote Martin Luther King Jr., we do a circle dance at solstice. How comforting. I believe that the 2nd source could be doing more of the work, if we shook it up a bit. The 2nd source is, words and deeds of prophetic people. Well, which people are we talking about? Prophetic people are people who shake things up. If you're comforted by a prophetic voice, that voice is no longer prophetic for you. It's found a home within your paradigm. So where can we find voices that rock your world?

The Our Whole Lives curriculum has one answer. Our Whole Lives, or OWL, is a sexuality curriculum that helps us to learn about ourselves and the whole range of human ways of being. The OWL curriculum says that there is a lot of wisdom at the margins. People who aren't in the mainstream paradigm are forced by circumstance to explore new ways of being. People who don't fit into the 1950s nuclear family. Lesbians and gays, often with joy but too often painfully, expand what is understood as normal and beloved. Bisexuals say, we're here too. Trans people say, we're here too. Nonbinary, asexual, gender queer people, continually expanding the Overton window. So where can I find prophetic voices? Often at the margins.

To summarize: We want the freedom to search for truth and meaning, but we have a limited view, so we can't search as freely as we'd like. We need to be intentional about searching beyond our paradigm, and in particular we need to turn towards the margins (and if you are at the margin in some way, you are at the centre in some other way. And even the margins have margins).

If you are free and irresponsible, you might do a search for truth and meaning, come across Elvis Presley, and say Eureka, I've found it, music doesn't get any better than this. But Elvis didn't invent his music out of nowhere. Elvis copied black musicians and black traditions. Before he met his manager, his manager knew the music, but because of racism he needed to find a white person to play it. If you are free and irresponsible, your search will stop with Elvis Presley. If you are free and responsible, what can you do?

In what ways do I need to be accountable, to help me to get beyond Elvis.

First and foremost, I need to be accountable to my conscience. If our society turns Elvis into Muzak that is meant to calm you down in the elevator, my conscience needs to say, this isn't right! Music is meant to be alive, toe-tapping, soul-expanding. Your conscience often knows when something isn't right. Human connection is meant to be beloved, heartfelt, forgiving, challenging, joyful. Your conscience often knows when something isn't right.

But my conscience can be lulled into complacency. I accept that life includes compromise, and then when things don't feel right, I brush it aside as just the way life is.

So sometimes, my conscience tells me that my conscience isn't enough. My conscience tells me that I have to suspend disbelief, and open myself up to other people's consciences.

Your conscience allows you to go to your workplace's Christmas party, even though it is soul-destroying. You talk to a friend about it, and your friend's conscience says, you can skip the party. The two of you talk it through, and you integrate their conscience into your point of view.

Your conscience tells you that your workplace is way too hierarchical (perhaps you are in academia), but a job is a job, so you stay with it. Other people don't make it into the hierarchy, and are forced by circumstance to develop other ways of relating. Their conscience tells them that their ways are worth spreading. Your conscience needs to expand to include consciences that are at the margins, that have something to say about how society is organized.

The proposed 8th principle has the word 'accountably' in it. What does accountability look like, when we care so much about freedom? Accountability does not mean putting aside your own conscience and depending on other people's consciences for approval. Accountability means suspending disbelief long enough to be able to integrate other paradigms into your perspective. If changing our minds was easy, we wouldn't need prophetic voices to shake things up for us. Now, integrating other points of view doesn't mean believing everything people tell you. Frankly, most prophetic voices are wrong. One of your friends will tell you to go to the office party and teach everyone the moves to the song Thriller (that only sometimes works). So get input from multiple friends before deciding what to do about the work party.

And when considering how to reorganize society, get input from multiple groups who are promoting another way from the margins. We all have blind spots. We are all privileged in some way, and that privilege means that we can't see what everyone else in the room can see. So suspend disbelief, crank open your Overton window, and go beyond your horizons, look to the margins. There is so much more to see.

Ask yourself, in what ways am I settling for Elvis, and what can I do so that I too can leave the building and have a search for truth and meaning that, by being responsive to other paradigms, becomes even freer.