**We Would Be One**

**Opening Reading**

# *“I would say that there exist a thousand unbreakable links between each of us and everything else, and that our dignity and our chances are one. The farthest star and the mud at our feet are a family; and there is no decency or sense in honoring one thing, or a few things, and then closing the list. The pine tree, the leopard, the Platte River, and ourselves - we are at risk together, or we are on our way to a sustainable world together. We are each other's destiny.”*

― **Mary Oliver,** [**Upstream: Selected Essays**](https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/49602235)

**Introduction of Speaker**

Rev. Kari Kopnick is a lifelong UU and an interfaith minister and chaplain serving The Chaplaincy Institute, an Interfaith Seminary & Community as the Community Minister. She has served as a Congregational Chaplain to area UU congregations when they are between ministers and is a Spiritual Director in private practice. Kari lives in Kent, WA with her husband of 35 years and a very needy little dog. You can find her at [karikopnick.org](http://karikopnick.org/).

**Sermon:**

I grew up attending a small, very secular fellowship in a suburb of Minneapolis. When I was about 10 years old I asked my mom if we should get saved like those people on TV. She marched us right down a little uu funky fellowship not too far from home. We arrived in 1977 when no congregations lit a chalice in worship and the six principles that had been part of the newly formed UUA bylaws created in 1961 were never mentioned in the course of our fellowship’s life. We grew up learning to be Unitarian Universalists by having fundraising lunches for the UU Service committee–cooking and serving and cleaning with members and painting the fellowship hall together. The conversations and connections across age groups showed us how the adults in our fellowship were living out their values, living out their authentic beliefs. Our Sunday School classes met weekly in the basement with one of those cardboard accordion room dividers pulled across the checkerboard linoleum. For a couple of years our classes were centered around the filmstrips from the UUA’s Beacon Press curriculum on world religions. Beacon Press hoped to sell these curricula to schools and other secular groups, so we spent a year on Islam and a year on Hinduism, but our classes included nothing about Unitarian or Universalist or Unitarian Universalist history. It was OK though, because I learned by doing, by being, by belonging.

The hymn that we just sang “We would be one”, is one of my favorites. It was written by Unitarian minister Samuel Anthony Wright, for Unitarian and Universalist youth at their Continental Convention of 1953-54. At this conference, these two groups merged to form what they called Liberal Religious Youth. LRY. When “We would be one” was written the lyrics were a little different. A few words were changed to be inclusive when it was added to *Singing the Living Tradition, the grey hymnal published in 1996*. The original included the lyrics "to show mankind a new community" which is now "to show to all a new community," and "strive to make men free" is now "strive to make us free." But the other change was "our hymn of youth" to "our hymn of love." So you see how it was written for the youth. I chose this hymn and I share this little backstory because I think it’s super cool that the Unitarian and Universalist youth consolidated their organizations almost 8 years before Unitarian and Universalist denominations did.

The religious educators began considering merging in 1949 and formally consolidated in 1954 renaming it as the Liberal Religious Education Directors Association, or LREDA, which is still the acronym today, although it now stands for Liberal Religious Educators Association. I served on the LREDA board and later worked for four years as their lone staff member. It’s a history that religious educators claim proudly, breaking ground of becoming one faith.

A piece of the history of how the denominations then came together is in the context of the times. Unitarians and Universalists had both lost members, energy, and funding following World war I and The Great Depression. Work began to explore if there was a path to come together in 1938. Their headquarters were literally across the street from each other. But it would not be until 1953, fifteen years later that the two denominations formed The Council of Liberal Churches, Inc. Do you see the theme here? Liberal Religious Youth, Liberal Religious Education Directors Association, Council of Liberal churches.

Let’s spend just a minute looking further back to the deep history of both the Unitarian and Universalist religions for a little sense of who and what these folks were.

It’s true that we can find a history of both the ideas of Unitarianism and Universalism in European and English history. I will always claim Francis David and the proclamation we attribute to him that says we need not believe alike to love alike. In fact, it’s the foundation of my life. But the Unitarian and Universalism that Unitarian Universalism descends from was formed here, on this side of the Atlantic.

Like many philosophies and ideas, similar things can and do emerge at different times or in different places.

A group of people in the young United States rejected the Calvinist ideas of predestination–of going to heaven or hell because it was chosen for you and unchangeable. This group believed in the idea of salvation by character and getting into heaven by doing good. This group was called Unitarians as a critique. This is what their critics called them.

The American Unitarians believed in the saved and the damned, but for them, the path to salvation was available to those who followed the laws of nature which were, it seemed, overseen by a God of reason, say….much like a president. Given that American Unitarians were founded in about 1815 and George Washington was elected in 1789 that makes a lot of sense. That’s 26 years from Washington’s election to the Unitarian inception. So our Unitarian ancestors here in the states were not so much rejecting the trinity as the Europeans and English, as they were rejecting the idea of people being unchangeably damned to hell by a ruthless God. By 1865 they called themselves the National Conference of Unitarian and other Christian churches.

Our Universalist ancestors were also reacting to Calvinism and that predetermined road to heaven or hell. They were called Universalists by their critics. But their critics were right and by 1780 Universalists had accepted the name and claimed the identity. The new Universalists accepted the Calvinist idea of God as monarch. They accepted that people are dependent on God for everything. It makes some sense that they formed themselves like a monarchy. In 1780 there was no president, the revolutionary war was still going on. So in the emerging Universalist belief system, God was a sort of a benevolent monarch. we were all princes and princesses that God was working to save. Predestination but all are destined to go to heaven.

If you were to put this in an elevator speech we might say Unitarians believed that people were too good to be damned and Universalists believed that God was too good to damn people.

For all the unique elements the roots of the faiths were very alike and as the years passed the similarities grew even stronger. They continued to evolve and change and become–pledging anew again and again as they learned more about living into the salvation of all and what that means. For some of us, even those of us who were present for the consolidation of Unitarian and Universalism, the past faiths seem to be almost alien to who we are now.

We can claim quite a fierce heritage in our ancestors. Our lineage is one of heartfelt spiritual expansion and intellectual rigor. We can see from our very history that these are both dynamic and evolving faiths and the long journey from Unitarian and Universalism to UU and then the continue evolving and transforming through the next sixty years is absolute proof that we are, by our very existence, a Living Tradition.

Given that there were so many similarities from the start and that these similarities grew as they both evolved toward justice for all, what do we think took these fierce, stalwart faiths so very long to come together. I mean, we can joke that it’s because a committee was formed. But, I love committee work. After working in the church kitchen, it’s my favorite way to spend time at church. Some of the best work happens in committees. But why so long?

The story goes that in 1959 1,000 delegates met to vote on the plan to consolidate offered by a group called the Joint Merger Commission. These folks went into deep process with the Unitarians and the Universalists both conflicted about the language that would be used to describe this new faith. Each group was offering amendments trying to use language that would be true to their lived theology while respecting the other group’s theology.

At 1am there was a knock on the door of Unitarian Minister Don Harrington with another version of the proposed language. But Harrington thought there was no hope, the vote had not passed that evening so it seemed that nothing could be done. At 3 am there was another knock on the door by Unitarian leader Percival Brundage with news that the Universalists had agreed to reconsider and vote again and with yet another version of the wording. The next day, after more debate and process, an agreement was made. It still took another two years of process, a vote followed by a call for congregations to discuss and another vote but finally, a merger agreement was reached.

I think that there are probably hundreds of different opinions about why the consolidation actually took so long. But what I see from my decades sometimes on the inside and sometimes on the outside of this faith is that our people have in their hearts and minds and souls a fiercely held commitment to rigorous process. This process is ours, it includes broad conversations had by congregations across the country in which they met and debated and learned and listened and spoke and considered. This way is a part of our heritage and our faith's DNA and, simply just who we are.

A similar process happened when the 1961 principles in the bylaws came up for renewal. Much of the credit for the regeneration of the 1961 principles to the current 1985 version goes to UU women. From the time of the merger in 1961 through the growing women’s movement of the 70s, UU women had become increasingly unhappy with the blatantly sexist language of the original principles, including a reference to "the dignity of man."

At the same time, there were two other issues that made it clear that the 1961 Principles no longer reflected the theology and evolving understanding of justice held by most UUs. The first was that traditions other than the Jewish and Christian are important to our heritage; second, that nature and the health of the environment is one of our primary theological concerns. The organized action for change came from the UU Women's Federation. It was not an easy road. As the discussion began, many UUs couldn't accept that they personally or their association was patriarchal.

Natalie Gulbrandsen UU Women’s Federation President had to explain to detractors repeatedly why references to "mankind" made women feel left out. She said "Those who did not see a need to change the principles in the bylaws said, 'Mankind' doesn't leave you out," Gulbrandson replied, “we are human beings but not men, and that there are many other terms you could use—humankind, human beings—that include women." Disagreement came from men, but also from women. Gulbrandson shared: "When we took the Women and Religion resolution to [the International Association for Religious Freedom], the English women were furious. Why would we want to do such a thing? they wanted to know. But”, Gulbrandsend said, “we felt that a wave was coming in our direction and eventually we would prevail,"

In 1981, a nonsexist revision of the Principles and Purposes drafted by various women's groups was presented to the General Assembly. It caused great uneasiness.

As ever there were discussions and commissions and committees. And as is our practice with each renewal of the principles, it came to an initial vote at the general assembly followed by congregations discussing and another vote with amendments and those fiercely held commitments to rigorous process. The 1961 principles were amended and updated to pretty much the principles you see in the front of the grey hymnal with a vote at the 1985 General Assembly.

If you’re following current events in UU governance there is a new set of principles that’s been proposed and will be voted on at the June UUA General Assembly. Rev. Mr. Barb Greve who was in your pulpit just a few weeks ago (and by the way sends greetings to you all) was a key part of the official call for the review of the 1985 version of the principals. Barb was the co=moderator of the UUA in 2019 when he and the late Elandria Williams charged the Commission on Appraisal to review article II of the bylaws which is where our principles are. Here in 2023, this revision is well underway with rigorous and heartfelt process and discernment and a commitment to involving the people of our faith to engage at every step. There will be a vote at the UUA General Assembly this June. If the majority votes to move the amended principles forward it will mean another year of discernment and conversation with a final vote at the 2024 General Assembly that will need to pass by 2/3s vote of the delegates.

This is your heritage. You come to this conversation about changing the name of your faith community with your religious ancestors at your back. I worked for Westside when they considered changing their name from West Seattle UU Fellowship to Westside UU Congregation. It was as you would expect, a rigorous process with a committee of course, and many gatherings with much discussion. The vote came down to a tie with the president voting as the tiebreaker. I get it. This is big. This matters. Your decision matters. Your name matters. But what I think matters more is your process. This is a time to decide things about your identity, your vision, what you are going to dream and love into existence in the next five years and the next 10 years and the next 50 years. And what a gift that is!

I have absolute faith that whatever you land on, will be exactly the right decision. My invitation to you is, that when you get that knock on the door at 3am, that you open the door.

Blessings and love to you, you dear people

By [Charles A. Howe](https://www.uua.org/offices/people/charles-howe)

*May we go forth from this place thankful for the life that sustains and renews us,*

*and open to the grace that surrounds and surprises us.*

*May we go forth from this place with openness and with thanksgivin*g.

Resources:

[YouTube video from Universalist Convocation 2016](https://youtu.be/56ZUYyF3lzk)

UU World Article: [How the UU Principles Were Shaped and How They’ve Shaped Unitarian Universalism](https://www.uuworld.org/articles/how-uu-principles-purposes-were-adopted) 5/1/2020, originally published in 2020

[A History Lesson: the Consolidation of the Unitarian and Universalist Faiths by John Cummins](https://www.uua.org/files/documents/cumminsjohn/010621_history_lesson.pdf)

[The Six Principles 1961](https://www.uuworld.org/articles/uuas-original-principles-1961)

[Sleepless in Syracuse from UU Tapestry of Faith, Faith Like a River, part of the story of the merger of Unitarian and Universalism](https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/river/workshop11/178690.shtml?fbclid=IwAR1Xgymm8lZiV1IqdRJ7Fm9pdOFfnAK6vgt0qwXjbcSFQ0Cr7qXEL_sSGeo)

[Article II Study Commission](https://www.uua.org/uuagovernance/committees/article-ii-study-commission)

[Article II Study Resources](https://www.uua.org/uuagovernance/committees/article-ii-study-commission/resources)

[Article II Timeline](https://www.uua.org/uuagovernance/committees/article-ii-study-commission/timeline)