

## Sermon for Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan

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### Integrity—Personal and Institutional

Good morning.

My topic today is Integrity, and I'm going to address both personal integrity and institutional integrity—not just any institution, but this institution, this fellowship, the congregation. (I try not to use the word “church” because that implies that we're a congregation of Christians and we're not. We welcome Christians and all others of any faith or no faith.)

In talking about both personal integrity and the integrity of this fellowship, my working definition will be the same. Integrity is when words and actions align with mission and values. When my words and actions align with my personal mission and values, I'm in integrity. When our words and actions as a fellowship line up with our mission and values, then we are in integrity as an institution.

I'll begin with personal integrity. If I'm going to evaluate and reflect on whether I'm in integrity, first I have to know what my mission and values are. Many of us have a general sense of our personal values, and I think it's a good practice to take time to articulate our own mission and values clearly. When I have done this, I came up with this mission statement:

*I create a world of harmony by connecting to the infinite source of love to empower myself, to heal others, and to work for peace and justice.*

This is grandiose—and it's supposed to be. Actually, the process I followed to come up with this mission statement started with envisioning the perfect world that I dream of. When I allow myself to really envision that, and to describe it concisely, it's a world of harmony. Then to make my mission statement more active, I imagine what am I doing, ideally, to make that ideal world a reality. That's how I came up with this:

*I create a world of harmony by connecting to the infinite source of love to empower myself, to heal others, and to work for peace and justice.*

On a regular basis, then, I can reflect on my words and actions and see if they are in alignment with my mission. When I am treating my loved ones, my family and friends, with respect and love, I'm acting in integrity with my mission. I'm creating harmony. When I'm being selfish, or judgmental, or controlling, or not engaging with my loved ones, then I'm not behaving in integrity with my mission and values.

There's an easy way that I can often recognize this, because my shadow side has a mission too. My shadow mission is the exact opposite of my true mission, and it is this:

*I destroy relationships and harm myself by judging myself and others, filling myself with fear and shame.*

My shadow is the judgmental selfish part of me. It's healthy for me to recognize that shadow and to keep it in front of me as much as possible.

Integrity, on a daily basis, also looks like keeping my word. If I say that I'm going to be somewhere at a certain time, or accomplish a certain task, being in integrity means that I keep my word. And when—not if but

when!—when I mess up and break a commitment that I make to you, my intention is to own my mistake clearly with you instead of hiding in shame, to acknowledge that I broke a commitment and to ask you how I can get back into right relation with you.

And if you and I both agree to committing to a life of integrity, and being true to our word, and restoring right relationship when commitments are broken, then we create a beautiful authentic community together.

So that brings me to the second part of what I want to say about integrity today: institutional integrity as it relates to this religious body, this fellowship. When are our words and actions in alignment with our mission and values?

Sally read the mission this morning during our welcome, and I will repeat it here:

*The mission of this Fellowship is:*

*To be a religious community guided by love, transforming our lives and our world.*

I will talk about this in three separate parts:

1. (religious) community guided by love
2. transforming our lives / our selves
3. transforming our world

First we are, according to our mission, a religious community guided by love. What does that look like and how do we know? In here, in our Sunday morning worship, I think it's about the words we speak. Whether I'm giving the morning message or someone else, the words spoken here should be words of love. If they are, then we are speaking in integrity with our mission.

And what about our actions? How we treat each other matters a lot. It matters in here, when we speak our joys and sorrows and we support one another. And everywhere that we gather—many of us are on committees, we gather at coffee hour after the service, some of us come to men's group, women's group, or the Friday potluck—whenever we gather, whether it be social or for fellowship business, are our words and actions those of a community guided by love? It's especially important to ask that question when it comes to people who challenge us by their difference or by their behavior. Sometimes when a person is different from me in a certain way, it's hard for me to connect with that person—and that's my work! It's not their work, it's my work. They are just being themselves. And sometimes someone just annoys me. And that's my work too, because I probably annoy you sometimes too, and being a community guided by love means that we are committed to transcending differences and annoyances.

The second part of our mission statement is: "...transforming our lives." We are a community guided by love, transforming our lives and our world. At least we say we are. And I think it's very possible to find transformation here if we enter with the right attitude. Again, I'm including what happens here in Sunday worship, where transforming yourself is possible with the right attitude—and it is just as likely to happen in coffee hour, at committee meetings, men's group, women's group, the Friday potluck, and anywhere we gather socially or for fellowship business. Because there's a lot of interesting people right here, and interacting with them can lead to transformation.

But you must bring with you an open mind and heart, ready to be transformed. You have to let go of your old self to transform into a new version of you—just like a caterpillar has to let go of being a caterpillar to become a butterfly. I'll give an example of this from my own experience, and this is connected to my experience in UU congregations. Before I became a UU, I thought that I understood gender. I thought that people were either

male or female. Through the Unitarian Universalist faith, my awareness has expanded, and I know understand that some people identify as neither male nor female; some identify as both; some evolve and change from one gender to another. I had to let go of an old belief, one that I had carried for decades, in order to make room for a new understanding.

If we are living into our mission, being in integrity with our mission, then we are acting, as a fellowship, in ways that allow us to transform our lives. We have Sunday services and other activities and groups that invite that kind of transformation. And I think we do, but I'm leaving it up to you to reflect on this question: are we doing all we can to be in integrity with this part of our mission?

Finally, our mission calls for us to transform the world. I think it's appropriate that this one comes last, because to a large degree we have to be a loving community first, to support one another; then we have to do our own internal work to transform ourselves; and only then can we go out and do the social justice work that we're called to do.

My personal example for this one is around race and racism. I am a person who has been socialized into an identity of whiteness. *I've been socialized into an identity of whiteness*—not "I'm white." Because I have been raised in this society, with its totally wacky ideas about race that tell me that some people are white and some are not, and that I'm white, and that that's important. And along with that, being a product of this society means that I have subconscious racism built into my brain—subconscious stereotypes about people of color. Doing the internal work to figure this out, and to get my own head straight about race and racism is necessary before I can go out into the world and try to transform anybody else's ideas or actions around race.

Speaking of race and racism, I was moved last Monday, Martin Luther King Day, by the experience of walking in the march. I went down to campus and marched up to the city square with hundreds of other people. We filled two city blocks, shoulder to shoulder, with many people carrying banners and signs. Most of the marchers were university students. And my dream is that next year, we get 10 or 20 of us to walk in that march, and we carry that banner—the UUFCM banner. Or our Black Lives Matter banner. If it's too hard to get it down off the building, I've got another one hanging in my basement that we can use.

I have one more example about social justice. Yesterday was our annual congregational retreat, and in this room yesterday we had 40 people spending all morning talking about social justice. Specifically, our task was to argue and discuss and prioritize, out of all the many social justice causes we could be involved in, the top two. And what we voted and agreed on was: 1. voting rights; and 2. the environment. This doesn't mean that we still can't march in the parade with our Black Lives Matter banner, but we have decided that by pooling our energy and working on those two social justice issues we can get more done than working individually and spreading ourselves out.

Getting back to the question of integrity, here is the overarching question: is our collective time, energy, and money spent on things that make us a loving community, that allow us to transform ourselves, and that aim toward transforming the world? When we look at the budget, we should be asking ourselves this question. If something doesn't serve our mission, it shouldn't be something we spend money on. Every program or activity of the fellowship, that we are collectively spending time and energy on – it should be in alignment with the mission and values.

Nancy McDonald Ladd had something to say about this at General Assembly in 2016 in Columbus, Ohio. She was talking about how we have fake fights in our congregations sometimes and, like a wrestler in a wrestling match, we need to tap out of those fights. I'm going to read a long excerpt from that sermon. She says:

*I tell you what, I'm tapping out—right now—and I invite you to join me. I'm tapping out of every fake fight in our congregations and our movement about getting what I want or what you want or what we think we want, because the stakes are too high and we don't have time for fake fights anymore.*

*A fake fight about the bylaws in the annual meeting is most often a carefully concealed real fight about the values that undergird our history coming into relationship with the values that may undergird our future. If we can get past duking it out over the paint color in the church bathroom, we may encounter a pastoral window into the inner life of one whose voice in the world seems increasingly powerless. And All Lives Matter—yes, that one, chief among the fake fights and cover conversations that distract from the work at hand—is not about the slogan. More often than not, it's about our deep and abiding resistance to actually taking on the systemic white supremacy that eats at the heart of us and of our culture.*

*I know, for a fact, that the real conversations are waiting. Just beneath the surface of the fake fight is the the actual encounter: soul to soul and hand to hand, in which change is possible.*

*So let's have that conversation—the real one, the hard one, the one that requires us to keep showing up—and let 's do it with edge and forgiveness, calling out and calling in, calling forth a new kind of community both in our congregations and in the world.*

*The real fight beckons—the real conversation about our history, our identity, our relevance, our resistance. The world does not need another place for like-minded liberal leaning people to hang out together and fight about who's in charge. The world does not need a place where you or I or any of us is going to get what we want.*

*What the world needs is a movement like ours to step more fully into our higher calling; to serve as an instrument for encounter with one another, with the holy, and with the world, so that we might love more fully, and speak more truly and serve with greater efficacy.<sup>1</sup>*

Blessed be the words of the Rev. Nancy McDonald Ladd. I don't think we have that many fake fights here, because this is a very healthy congregation. And still, I think her words are worth hearing.

I'll end this morning with a prayer.

*Spirit of life and love, may each of us be self-aware enough to know our personal mission and values, and courageous enough to follow them. May we catch ourselves when we are out of integrity and keep striving when we fail.*

*May this Fellowship have the clarity to see our mission and the tenacity to stick to it. May we continue to be a community guided by love, and may we find ways to be even more loving. May we find opportunities to transform ourselves, and support one another in doing so. And may we be bold in our social justice work as we seek to bring our message of love into the world, wherever that message is needed.*

*May it be so.*

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy McDonald Ladd, "Tapping Out of Fake Fights." 2016. Retrieved at <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/tapping-out-fake-fights>