

WORKSHOP 1: THE LOCUS OF MORAL AUTHORITY

INTRODUCTION

Unthinking respect for authority is the greatest enemy of truth. — Albert Einstein

We are regularly faced with the need to choose a course of action in response to a given situation. We must weigh a variety of factors, including competing interests, expediency, and moral or ethical values. This workshop explores the moral and ethical considerations we weigh in our decision-making. We will ask: What ethical framework guides us when we make our choices? From where have we derived it? To whom or what does our ethical framework hold us accountable? Is our framework clear enough to guide us through a complex decision or choice?

Some of our ethical beliefs and values come from philosophical, ethical, and cultural traditions, while others may be grounded in a long theological tradition. Some derive from our life experiences, combined with what we have been taught by our family, community, or culture. "Religious" ethics are ethical frameworks that derive from theological understandings and offer a way to live in the world and make behavioral choices that are consonant with particular religious beliefs, traditions, and sources of authority. Some religions draw on sacred texts as the sources of moral authority. Some religious traditions draw on the authority of a religious figure or understandings transmitted from one generation to the next. Different religious traditions have different ways of valuing individual conscience and community wisdom and traditions.

Because Unitarian Universalists have many different theologies and draw spiritual inspiration from a broad range of sources, what is the basis for Unitarian Universalist religious ethics? Many Unitarian Universalists would point to our Principles as a statement of values we uphold and to our Sources as some of our sources of moral authority. But do our Principles and Sources give clear, comprehensive guidance for ethical decision making? How do we work with a religious tradition that has multiple sources of moral authority, including the individual conscience and experience, wisdom from the world's religions, the teachings of science, and the Western Jewish and Christian philosophical and religious traditions? How do we bring the wisdom of so many disparate sources of authority to bear on moral and ethical choices in our day-to-day lives? How do we discern a moral path?

This workshop invites participants to reflect on the moral and ethical decision-making process they apply to complex choices. Participants discover and name both

Unitarian Universalist values shared with others and guiding personal values which have been developed through life experience, received wisdom from family or community, and personal reflection and study. The workshop asks: To what authority or authorities do you turn for guidance when faced with a moral dilemma or decision?

Before leading this workshop, review Accessibility Guidelines for Workshop Presenters in the program Introduction.

GOALS

This workshop will:

- Introduce the program
- Introduce participants to one another and invite them build a covenant for the program
- Build trust and promote sharing among participants
- Introduce the notion of moral authority and encourage participants to explore the framework which guides their moral and ethical decision making.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Participants will:

- Covenant together about expectations for participation in the program
- Share their expectations and hopes for the program
- Consider the notion of moral authority
- Identify where they locate moral authority to guide their ethical and moral decision making.

WORKSHOP-AT-A-GLANCE

Activity	Minutes
Welcoming and Entering	0
Opening	10
Activity 1: Program Overview and Expectations	10
Activity 2: Opening Scenario	20
Activity 3: What Guides Me?	25
Activity 4: Emerson's Locus of Moral Authority	30
Activity 5: Group Covenant	20
Faith in Action: Covenants in Congregational Life	

Closing	5
Alternate Activity 1: Exploring Ethical Statements	25
Alternate Activity 2: Values Mapping	25

SPIRITUAL PREPARATION

Recall an important moral or ethical decision you have made, and use the following focus questions to help you think about your decision-making process:

- What was the dilemma and what decision did you make?

- What framework or ethical precepts guided your decision making?
- What was/were the source(s) of those precepts? Was it your conscience? Family, community, or cultural values? The wisdom of a moral or religious thinker? Literature? Scripture? Reason, or a scientific understanding? Some combination of sources?
- Why did you decide to grant that source the authority you ultimately gave it?

WELCOMING AND ENTERING

Materials for Activity

- Handout 1, Schedule for Ethics Workshops
- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- Sign-in sheet and pen or pencil
- Pocket folder, pen/pencil, and paper for each participant
- Name tags, single-use or durable
- Optional: Refreshments

Preparation for Activity

- Customize Handout 1, Schedule for Ethics Workshops, and copy for all participants.
- Using the Workshop-at-a-Glance as a guide, create and post the agenda on newsprint.

Description of Activity

Welcome all participants, offer them a folder, and ask them to create a name tag.

OPENING (10 MINUTES)

Materials for Activity

- Worship table or designated space
- Chalice, candle, and lighter, or LED/battery-operated candle
- *Singing the Living Tradition*, the Unitarian Universalist hymnbook

Preparation for Activity

- Arrange the worship table or designated space.

Description of Activity

Light the chalice and share Reading 531 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, "The Oversoul" by Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Introduce yourself. Invite participants to briefly introduce themselves with a name and a sentence or two about their connection to the congregation and community.

ACTIVITY 1: PROGRAM OVERVIEW AND EXPECTATIONS (10 MINUTES)

Materials for Activity

- Handout 1, [Schedule for Ethics Workshops](#) (included in this document)
- Newsprint, markers, and tape

Preparation for Activity

- Download Handout 1, Schedule for Ethics Workshops. Customize the handout for your

program. Copy for all participants, plus a few extra.

- Briefly review all the workshops you plan to present in your series so you can answer general questions about each.
- Write these questions on newsprint, and post:
 - Why did you decide to take part in this ethics program?
 - What would you like to learn, experience, or take home with you?

Description of Activity

Distribute the workshop schedule. Call attention to the workshop titles and topics. Invite questions and comments.

Indicate the questions you have posted on newsprint and invite participants to respond, each in turn. Tell them they have the right to pass if they do not wish to share. Take notes about participant expectations to help plan effectively for later workshops.

ACTIVITY 2: OPENING SCENARIO (20 MINUTES)

Materials for Activity

- Newsprint, markers, and tape

Preparation for Activity

- Read the scenario so you will be comfortable presenting it.
- Post blank newsprint.

Description of Activity

Introduce this activity using these or similar words:

Each workshop in this series will open with an ethical dilemma for which there is not a single, correct response. The idea is not to debate what is the best response in the situation, but rather to consider some of the issues we will explore in that particular workshop.

Share this scenario:

You are driving a car when you come to a four-way intersection. Your light is red. There are no other vehicles or people anywhere nearby. What do you do? Why?

Invite participants to turn to a partner and share their response to the dilemma. Urge participants to focus more on the reasoning behind their response than the response itself. Allow ten minutes for pairs to talk, and then re-gather the group. Ask: "What ethical precepts, reasons, or frameworks were named in your partner conversations?" List these precepts on the newsprint you have posted.

ACTIVITY 3: WHAT GUIDES ME? (25 MINUTES)

Materials for Activity

- Journals or notebooks, one for each participant
- Writing and drawing materials, such as pens, pencils, fine point color markers, and color pencils
- Newsprint, markers, and tape

Preparation for Activity

- Write this prompt on newsprint:
 - Share a story from religious texts, personal experience, scientific understanding, contemporary culture, your family or community history and teachings, or another source that helps frame your ethical decision making.
- Set writing and drawing materials where participants can reach them.

Description of Activity

Distribute journals or notebooks. Explain that participants will have time to write or draw in their journals as part of each workshop. Encourage them to journal between workshops as well.

Point out the prompt you have posted. Invite participants to take a few minutes to find their story and write or draw in their journal before sharing it with others in a small group. Allow ten minutes for reflection and writing.

Invite participants to create groups of three and to share their stories with one another. Allow ten minutes for small group conversation, and then re-gather the large group. Ask:

- To what stories do we turn for guidance with moral issues?
- How does religion or spirituality inform those stories?

Including All Participants

Some participants may have a hard time hearing in a room with many groups speaking at once. Invite groups to move apart or provide areas for groups to meet outside the main room.

ACTIVITY 4: EMERSON'S LOCUS OF MORAL AUTHORITY (30 MINUTES)

Materials for Activity

- A copy of the story "[Emerson's Moral Dilemma](#)" (included in this document)
- Leader Resource 1, [About Emerson](#) (included in this document)

- Leader Resource 2, [The Divinity School Address — Excerpts](#) (included in this document)

- Newsprint, markers, and tape

Preparation for Activity

- Familiarize yourself with the story so you will be comfortable presenting it.
- Print Leader Resource 1 and prepare to present its contents to the group.
- Invite two participants to prepare to read aloud the two paragraphs in Leader Resource 2. Give them Leader Resource 2 well in advance.
- Write on newsprint, and post:
 - What are strengths of Emerson's argument that ultimate moral authority rests with each individual's conscience?
 - What are drawbacks or weaknesses in locating moral authority primarily with the individual conscience?
 - Do you agree or disagree with Emerson? Where do you think moral authority lies?

Description of Activity

Introduce the activity with these or similar words:

In the mid-19th century, Ralph Waldo Emerson radically shaped the American liberal religious landscape. Many were convinced by his writings, which stated that spiritual and moral authority ought to rest not with clergy and scripture but rather in the conscience of the individual.

Share the story, "Emerson's Moral Dilemma." Then, invite participants to pose questions or offer insights about Emerson's dilemma.

Share the material in Leader Resource 1. Say:

Several years after leaving Second Church, Emerson was invited to preach before the graduating class at Harvard Divinity School. He used the occasion to challenge his former ministerial colleagues and to explain his own religious and moral philosophy.

Have pre-assigned readers present the two sections of the Divinity School Address given by Ralph Waldo Emerson on July 15, 1838. Pause after each section and invite questions, comments, and observations.

Note that there are at least three possible sources of moral authority—the individual, the community, and God. Ask: "Where does Emerson place the locus of ethical authority?" Lead a discussion using the posted questions.

ACTIVITY 5: GROUP COVENANT (20 MINUTES)

Materials for Activity

- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- Handout 2, [Unitarian Universalist Principles and Sources](#) (included in this document)
- Optional: Your congregation's covenant

Preparation for Activity

- Copy Handout 2, Unitarian Universalist Principles and Sources for all participants.
- If your congregation has a covenant or a bond of union, copy it for all participants or write the text on newsprint.
- Identify a place to keep the newsprint covenant the group will generate, so you can post it at all future workshops.

Description of Activity

Say that "covenant" is foundational to our tradition: We are united by our promises to one another, rather than by a shared creed.

Distribute Handout 2. Point out that while our Principles and Sources are a covenant intended to guide congregations that are part of the Unitarian Universalist Association, many Unitarian Universalists have adopted this covenant to guide their own lives and to help them with moral and ethical choices.

If your congregation has a covenant, distribute or post it now.

Post blank newsprint. Invite participants to brainstorm guidelines for how to treat one another in the group. Suggest the guidelines be in the spirit of the congregational covenant, although they will likely be more specific. Write suggestions on newsprint.

After three minutes of brainstorming, ask if there are any additions people wish to make. Ask if any items on the list need further discussion. Once all have agreed to the items on the list, ask each person to signal assent to the covenant by nodding or raising a hand.

Point out that in Jewish and mainstream Christian traditions, adherents covenant with God, or in the presence of God. The ethical authority foundational to the covenant is God. Ask: "Where does the ethical authority that is foundational to our covenant rest? Why?"

Save the covenant newsprint to post at future workshops.

CLOSING (5 MINUTES)

Materials for Activity

- *Singing the Living Tradition*, the Unitarian Universalist hymnbook
- [Taking It Home](#) (included in this document) handout

Preparation for Activity

- Customize Taking It Home and copy for all participants. You may wish to include this workshop's Faith in Action activity, this workshop's Find Out More section, and/or the Spiritual Preparation section of the workshop that is next in your series.

Description of Activity

Invite participants to share, in a word or phrase, something they will take from the workshop.

Distribute Taking It Home.

Share Reading 661 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, "The Heart Knoweth" by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Extinguish the chalice.

FAITH IN ACTION: COVENANTS IN CONGREGATIONAL LIFE (20 MINUTES)

Materials for Activity

- Sample Unitarian Universalist congregational or small-group covenants, and descriptions of how each came to be written
- *Singing the Living Tradition*, the Unitarian Universalist hymnbook

Preparation for Activity

- If you have a congregational covenant, research the covenant's creation. Ask your minister or a member who was involved. Ask groups within the congregation, such as youth groups and small group ministry groups, if they have covenants they are willing to share with participants in this program. Ask for the covenant and a brief description of how it was written. Copy the covenants and descriptions for participants. If you are unable to find written covenants within your congregation, find examples on the websites of other Unitarian Universalist congregations.
- Read examples of covenants in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Readings 471-478).
- Invite appropriate congregational leaders to meet with your group to talk about creating or renewing a congregational covenant.

STORY: EMERSON'S MORAL DILEMMA

Ralph Waldo Emerson was a leading 19th-century philosopher, father of the Transcendentalist movement. Before he became a philosophical and literary luminary, he was a Unitarian minister and served the Second Church in Boston between 1829 and 1832. In pursuing ministry, Ralph Waldo followed in the footsteps of his father, William Emerson, a Unitarian minister who served Boston's First Church.

In 1831 and 1832, the younger Emerson became embroiled in a controversy at Second Church. As a Unitarian Christian minister, Emerson was expected to regularly conduct a communion service. Emerson did not find the act of communion personally meaningful. Because he was interested in a depth of authentic personal experience with the sacred that did not have room for ritual for the sake of ritual, Emerson told his congregation he would no longer offer the sacrament of communion.

His decision created uproar. For many Christian Unitarians, communion was a central sacrament. Although the congregation was fond of Emerson, his declaration seemed unreasonable to them. Church leaders tried to negotiate with Emerson, hoping he would change his mind. They offered a compromise: Since the parishioners found the act of communion meaningful, they asked if Emerson could perhaps offer communion to the attendees of the church but not partake of the sacrament himself, in light of his philosophical objections. Emerson did not agree to this compromise and the negotiations were not successful.

Emerson recognized this disagreement with the congregation of Second Church as an insurmountable difference between his philosophical and spiritual understanding and the congregation's, and he voluntarily resigned his pulpit. While he never disavowed Unitarianism, or his status as a minister, he never again used his title "Reverend" nor served a congregation. Instead, he chose to express himself through lecturing and writing.

Emerson believed we cultivate our own character and through this cultivation become agents of good or evil in the world. Further, cultivation of character is grounded in an unmediated experience of the sacred, one that occurs by looking inward. Finding that spark of divinity within us, it is possible to have a direct, transcendent experience of the holy. Emerson's belief became the cornerstone of the Transcendentalist movement, and Emerson's greatest spiritual contribution to Unitarian Universalism.

HANDOUT 2: UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST PRINCIPLES AND SOURCES

There are seven Principles which Unitarian Universalist congregations covenant to affirm and promote:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Unitarian Universalism draws wisdom from many Sources:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life;
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;
- Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

HANDOUT 3: ETHICAL STATEMENTS

- There are moral sources and/or authorities that inform or guide my ethical behavior.
- I have firm moral convictions.
- Each person is entitled to their view of what is right and wrong.
- Truth exists and our understanding of it becomes clearer over time.
- We must always do the maximum good for the maximum number of people.
- Being the best person I can be helps keep me morally grounded.
- I believe that there are rights to which everyone is entitled by virtue of being human.
- My morality is informed by my experiences in the world.
- It is through meaningful relationship with one another that we can determine what is best and most true.
- Ethical beliefs are irrelevant if they are not accompanied by action.
- Moral decisions must be grounded in compassion.
- People cannot be ethical by themselves; ethical behavior is enacted in a community context.
- It takes courage to live out our Unitarian Universalist values.

LEADER RESOURCE 1: ABOUT EMERSON

Ralph Waldo Emerson advocated direct experience of religious sentiment, unmediated by clergy, or by tradition or ritual. In describing himself as a "Transcendentalist," Emerson lifted up his belief that it was possible for people to have a direct, transcendent experience of reality, a personal experience of God (what he called the Over Soul), by turning inward. He believed that the sacred which exists without and all around us also exists within, and that by turning inward and getting in deeper touch with our truest nature, we can experience and be informed by that light inside us.

Emerson had some disdain for the preaching style of his time. His view was that ministers should share from the pulpit an authentic and personal reflection of themselves and their lives, rather than preach from a detached, intellectual perspective. He urged ministers to share their experience "passed through the fire of thought" and deep reflection.

Emerson's decisions and statements help us to understand his locus of moral authority. For example, he relied on personal experience as the source of moral authority when he went against his parishioners' wishes in refusing to offer communion. In advocating for an unmediated, personal experience of religion and writing that the essential nature of the human experience is the cultivation of character, Emerson affirmed that moral authority is located within the self. Emerson's ideas still resonate with many Unitarian Universalists today.

LEADER RESOURCE 2: THE DIVINITY SCHOOL ADDRESS — EXCERPTS

[Remarks by Ralph Waldo Emerson, delivered before the graduating class of Harvard's Divinity School](#) on July 15, 1838.

The intuition of the moral sentiment is an insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul. These laws execute themselves. They are out of time, out of space, and not subject to circumstance. Thus, in the soul of man there is a justice whose retributions are instant and entire. He who does a good deed, is instantly ennobled. He who does a mean deed, is by the action itself contracted. He who puts off impurity, thereby puts on purity. If a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God; the safety of God, the immortality of God, the majesty of God do enter into that man with justice. If a man dissemble, deceive, he deceives himself, and goes out of acquaintance with his own being. A man in the view of absolute goodness, adores, with total humility. Every step so downward, is a step upward. The man who renounces himself, comes to himself.

See how this rapid intrinsic energy worketh everywhere, righting wrongs, correcting appearances, and bringing up facts to a harmony with thoughts. Its operation in life, though slow to the senses, is, at last, as sure as in the soul. By it, a man is made the Providence to himself, dispensing good to his goodness, and evil to his sin. Character is always known. Thefts never enrich; alms never impoverish; murder will speak out of stone walls. The least admixture of a lie,—for example, the taint of vanity, the least attempt to make a good impression, a favorable appearance, — will instantly vitiate the effect. But speak the truth, and all nature and all spirits help you with unexpected furtherance. Speak the truth, and all things alive or brute are vouchers, and the very roots of the grass underground there, do seem to stir and move to bear you witness.

See again the perfection of the Law as it applies itself to the affections, and becomes the law of society. As we are, so we associate. The good, by affinity, seek the good; the vile, by affinity, the vile. Thus of their own volition, souls proceed into heaven, into hell.

FIND OUT MORE

Andrews, Barry M. [*A Dream Too Wild: Emerson Meditations for Every Day of the Year*](#) (Boston: Skinner House, 2003)

Andrews, Barry M. [*Emerson As Spiritual Guide: A Companion to Emerson's Essays for Personal Reflection and Group Discussion*](#) (Boston: Skinner House, 2003)

Miller, P. *The Transcendentalists: An Anthology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950)

Richardson, R. *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996)

[Ralph Waldo Emerson](#) in the *Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography*.