

The Worth and Dignity...of *Everyone*???

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Reading

Huston Smith, from What Does It Mean to be Human? edited by Frederick Franck:

Here is where the question of human nature jumps to importance, for the nobler we imagine ourselves, the better we are likely to behave, which is what makes encouragement so important. It's quite simple, really. The better we feel about ourselves, the better we feel about others, and this leads us to treat them better. And to perform better generally. This is the conclusion of Robert Rosenthal's...experiment which showed that pupils whose teachers thought they were intelligent came to believe that they were intelligent; which belief enabled them to perform more intelligently—their grades improved. Regardless of how much he felt he needed to cram, one of my college roommates always devoted the last half hour before an examination to taking a shower and donning a white shirt. It jacked up his self-respect, he said.

Psychology stops there...but religions don't. They add creation myths—accounts of how people got here. And it is not difficult to see why they do so; for where people position themselves on the scale of self-esteem

depends (more than on any other factor) on how they think they arrived—the ancestry they posit for themselves...To believe that one is descended from noble stock is to assume that one is made of noble stuff, which in turn disposes one to behave nobly, though of course it doesn't guarantee such behavior...

When we add to the foregoing conclusion Marshall Sahlin's anthropological observation that "we are the only people who think themselves risen from savages; everyone else believes they descended from gods," we have the gist of the point I have been trying to make; namely that the decline in our view of human nature is a serious matter. This lends urgency to the question of whether we are bound to that view. Do we know things our forebears didn't that force us to stay with the low view of human nature that currently hobbles us, or did we stumble into that view through mistakes?

Sermon

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

This is the first of our Seven Principles, from a document known popularly as the Principles and Purposes, and can be found in what is even more excitingly referred to as Article II of the Bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Also included in this article are the Sources of our Tradition and the Mission of the Unitarian Universalist Association. If you don't fancy searching the bylaws of our Association, never fear: the Principles can more easily be found in your hymnals, hymnal supplements, on our orders of service, in our newsletters, and on our web site...We are not alone among congregations in finding the Principles helpful in giving the world an idea of who we are, and also helpful in shaping our identity within the congregation.

Now I welcome people every week saying that we do not gather around a single set of beliefs, and you may be wondering if that is really true now that we are

talking about this group of Principles that is plastered everywhere. Is this a case of a creed by another name? Well, no. There are a couple of important differences. First, you do not have to give, or even pretend to give, philosophical or intellectual assent to the ideas that you find in the Principles to be one of us. I have spoken to some of you who, quite frankly, have problems with with one or more of the Principles. Oftentimes, it is a stylistic complaint (generally speaking, Unitarian Universalists can be legitimately accused of never settling for one word when twenty five will do), but sometimes it is a substantive disagreement. Do we really, for example, believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person? *Inherent* worth and dignity? Of *every* person? What does that mean?

William F. Schultz, past President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, and current President of Amnesty International, gave a lecture this last month in St. Louis entitled *What Torture Has Taught Me*. Recounting the stories of torture victims, describing just a few of the many and brutal ways in which humans inflict the most intense pain and unimaginable suffering on other humans, Schultz explicitly challenged the concept of the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Experience seemed to have led him, *pulled* him, to a different conclusion.

So do you have to personally *believe* the Principles? No. However--you knew this was coming, right?--however, I think it is important that you grapple with the Principles. You can't *ignore* them. You can choose not to believe them, but the mission of this congregation includes "promoting the principles of Unitarian Universalism," it *requires* that you wrestle with them. Furthermore, one of the motivations for doing this sermon at this time is that the association of Unitarian Universalist congregations, with the Commission on Appraisal as facilitators, is beginning a process in which we will be reviewing these Principles. We, in this congregation, along with other congregations far and wide, will be able to give our input; to suggest changes; to point out areas that we're not addressing; to revise the language or focus of a Principle that we feel does not quite say it for us anymore, perhaps...Built into the bylaw that contains our Principles is an automatic review process--which is another major difference between the Principles and a creed—an automatic review process every 15 years, and we're now overdue. These Principles were passed in 1985, with a large portion of the initial impetus being to rid the original Principles, that had carried over from the merger of Unitarianism and Universalism, of patriarchal and male-biased language. And once the revision process opened up, more great possibilities emerged for making the Principles better reflect who we had grown to be as a movement.

And this is an important thing to keep in mind, and one that we will follow as we look at a Principle each month throughout the next year: Besides looking at the existing language of the Principle, it is often helpful to know the issue, question,

theological point, or societal circumstance it may have been intended to address. Was there a question, alive at the time, that may now be forgotten, that folks were seeking to answer? Was there an already-existing Principle or idea that it was intended to amend or revise?

Quick example from the Hebrew Scriptures: An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. I grew up believing that this was a horribly bloodthirsty way to go about things, (not least of all from trying to actually picture taking someone's eye or tooth away from them). The truth is, as many of you know, that this was an attempt at actually *moderating* the retribution that people sought upon injury. It was speaking to those who operated under a much more brutal type of behavior. Something like: You poke my eye, I kill your family. No, no, said others. The retribution should be in kind. There should be some sort of equalizing influence to say, you deserve this in payment, but no more. "An eye for an eye" takes on a different tone, then, doesn't it?

There are many in our movement, as I mentioned earlier, who have real trouble with the perception of an overly optimistic view of human nature that the first principle suggests. [In an article published in the UU World](#), just a few months after the events of September 11, 2001, the writer asked "whether, in light of our new acquaintance with terrorists, our first principle — our affirmation of the worth and dignity of every person — still holds up." One of the respondents, Rev. Davidson Loehr, said "'I don't believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person for a second. Human behavior is a bell curve. The overwhelming majority are good folks, some few are saints, some few are sociopaths, psychopaths, evil people."

You may have sympathy with this perspective. You may agree with David Krieger in our Opening Words who said that being born into the human species does not assure our humanity; that how we live will determine our humanness. Shouldn't we earn the attribution of worth and dignity? Isn't that a function of how we choose to act in the world? Isn't it a huge, unprovable stretch to say that worth and dignity is *inherent*? By all appearances, it seems that some people just don't have it.

On the other hand, can we be so quick to toss this principle aside. Were the people who helped to create this affirmation really so naive? Did they hope that, by ignoring evil, they could make it go away? Were they so privileged as to be virtually untouched by the darker side of human nature?

As with "an eye for an eye," we have to realize that the first principle, and indeed all of the principles, are not only statements in themselves, but responses.

Responses to life, certainly, but also responses to others in the ongoing conversation about the meaning of life that we call *religion*. Universalism and Unitarianism were responses to a harsher view of God and human nature that was most aptly conveyed in Calvinism. In Calvinism, *all* of humanity was born sinful, tarnished, unworthy, and only the Elect were destined to be with God in Paradise. Unitarianism, in opposing that view, stressed the potential in humans to make moral choices and better themselves. And Universalism, in response to Calvinist theology, stressed the all-encompassing love of God, the love that included all of humanity: No child of God left behind. Universalist minister Thomas Starr King, who also served Unitarian congregations, quoted a Universalist layperson as describing the two viewpoints in another way when he said, "The Universalists believe that God is too good to damn us forever, and the Unitarians believe that [we] are too good to be damned." And as we moved to embrace a wider view of Unitarianism and Universalism, including non-theistic humanism and ethics, some feel that the scale tipped in favor of the Unitarian conception, putting a huge amount of faith in human goodness and human potential. It is safe to say that salvation was envisioned, for a time, by some brave visionaries, to be well within human reach.

This may have been why, in 1960, as the two denominations strove to develop principles that would guide the merger, an early version of our first principle said this: "To affirm, defend and promote the supreme worth of every human personality, the dignity of man, and the use of the democratic method in human relationships."

Now, outside of the dated quality of "the dignity of *man*," take a look at that other phrase: the *supreme* worth of every human personality. All of a sudden, the *inherent* worth, as a modifier for the *supreme* worth, can be seen in a different light. The Rev. Walter Royal Jones, who chaired the committee that drafted the principles and purposes that the UUA adopted in 1985, [says that this formulation](#) was quite deliberately qualified by adding the term "inherent," to make it clear that worth and dignity are potentials that are part, but only part, of the human condition.

"The principle is not and was never intended to be a blanket endorsement of everything that everybody does," he says. Instead, it "sets a standard by which our behavior can be judged." Of course we are angered by the hideous violation of the principle by the terrorists, but that is precisely why we should not surrender it, for without it, how could we judge their actions?

And, I would add, how could we judge our own? The beauty of the first principle, to me, is that, first of all, not unlike original sin, it puts us all on the same page

(but of a different story). The Universalist good news infuses the words: we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. It is speaking to the same psychological truth that Huston Smith talked about in the reading: The better we feel about ourselves the better we feel about others and the better we are apt to treat them. We must know that those arrogant souls out there, who treat everyone shhhhabily, who seem to have such a high opinion of themselves...they don't, really. They are not aware of their own nobility, or they believe that it must somehow be measured against, that it must exceed, the next person's. They don't love themselves, and they feel this lack of self-worth, but they have only a distorted view of how to achieve it.

"The nobler we imagine ourselves, the better we are likely to behave," says Huston Smith, "and that is what makes encouragement so important." You want me to change? Let me know that I'm worth it. You want me to grow? Tell me that it is—that *I am*—worth the struggle. "Give them not hell, but hope," said John Murray. This is not damaging to our characters, but enriching. This does not excuse evil behavior, but calls it into judgment; calls people to the responsibility of living out their own worth and dignity in full recognition of the worth and dignity of everyone else. If we get too wrapped up in the philosophical question of "is worth and dignity really inherent in the human species?" we miss the ethical point. The first principle is not a statement of absolute theological truth, it is a guide to how we wish to treat one another. Our initial impulse, always, should be to speak from an awareness of our own worth and dignity to the awareness of another's worth and dignity. People are not expendable, and I certainly would not want to be the one, in Davidson Loehr's assessment of human nature, to distinguish between those who have worth and dignity and those who, through some fluke of the cosmic assembly line, do not...I think he's missing the point.

Let me give you another example: We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men are created equal. Is that self-evident? I think not. Does it call us-- especially once we realize that "men" should be expanded to include all people—does it call us to responsible ethical behavior? Yes.

How about this: the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice. Can we prove that? I doubt it, not by my history book...yet it inspires our work toward justice; our work requires more than facts and figures, it calls for imagination and poetry and a sense of where we belong and how we belong in the universe.

None of these statements are meant to be scientifically proved; they are imaginative portrayals that help to orient us when we ask the question: how are we gonna be? How will we be with each other? How will we meet and learn about and live with each other?

For William Schulz, who I mentioned earlier, the first principle *is* a valid faith statement. He is quoted in the UU World article as saying of this first principle, "It does not claim that every person has worth and dignity. Rather, it is an affirmation that worth and dignity are values that we attribute to human beings. It is also a strategy, asserting that every person has certain fundamental rights, and that we can make the world a better place when we treat people as having worth and dignity, even if they do not treat us that way."

In that same article, minister, theologian and professor, Thandeka, tied the first principle in with our seventh principle, saying that "horrible events" make it more important than ever "to promote the worth and dignity of every person." She also proposes that the individual principles cannot be understood in isolation. "The term 'person' has to be defined," she says, "and the seventh principle defines it as someone connected to 'the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.'

That suggests an ecological concept of a person as someone who is related to other persons and to the world." This points the way to another possible revision of the first principle that I've heard is being proposed by UU's for the Ethical Treatment of Animals and the UU Buddhist Association: we covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity *of all living beings*.

So possible changes are in the works. Maybe we'll find a better expression for *inherent*. Maybe we will expand our conception beyond only the human species. I was inspired by the one of the conversations on the Plan B book to suggest that, if we stick with *the worth and dignity of every person*, we put an asterisk by "person" to distinguish real persons from "corporate personhood."

Conversations will be going on throughout this year and the years ahead. And the whole process of review and revision is amazing in itself...Remember that, well into the 20th century, our Unitarian predecessors used to proclaim and teach their children that we believe in "The Fatherhood of God, the Brotherhood of Man, the Leadership of Jesus, Salvation through Character, and the Progress of Mankind Onward and Upward Forever." By remaining open to revision, review, and change, we have broadened our boundaries...but we don't kid ourselves that we now have the wisdom to set those boundaries for all time. I am proud to be part of a tradition that accepts that challenge forthrightly.

Universalists were often asked where they stand on issues. An apt response was given by Universalist minister L.B. Fisher: "The only true answer to give to this question is we don't stand at all, we move."

I am honored to be moving beside you.