

You're Worth It

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Our first principle states:

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

While preparing for this sermon, I looked back to my 40th birthday. I was newly sober and early sobriety is hard - it's not just because you're avoiding drinking. It's the looking back and seeing the relationships ruined, bills unpaid and homes wrecked that make it so difficult. I was lonely that day and had no one to turn to. My old drinking buddies weren't interested in being around me anymore than I wanted to be around them. I knew I was going to be alone and it was going to be a rough day, so I made a plan to be safe by filling my day with AA meetings. I mapped out in advance how to get from one meeting to another.

I was full of anger, resentment and self-pity. Here it was my birthday and not a single person called. Not one. I was walking to a meeting and was passing a park and I heard people laughing, and having a good time and that was my breaking point. I screamed some obscenities, pulled out my cellphone and threw it into some bushes.

The ridiculous part of this story is that it was one of those pre-paid phone and there were no more minutes left. It was impossible for anyone to reach me. Even more ridiculous is that I knew this and it didn't matter. Logic was irrelevant. I don't know how others felt about me, but I had no sense of worth and dignity.

We love our 7 principles. They help explain who we are as Unitarian Universalists. They are so important that each week we print them on the front of the order of service. <> But, have you ever wondered where they came from? Who decided what our principles should be? Let's look back.

You may be surprised to know that talks of a merger between the Unitarians and Universalists began as early as 1865. However, each time discussions began hopes of a merger would fall apart. This should come as no surprise to those of you who have served on church committees, but it wasn't until 100 years later for the two churches to iron out the details. It wasn't until 1959, when the two organizations agreed to a full merger.

It wasn't an easy road. There was much conflict between the generally humanist Unitarians, and the more spiritual Universalists.

After all, how do you bring two organizations, with such different beliefs, together as one? They did it by respecting their differences. The merger did not develop one common belief. Instead they made an agreement of shared principles.

We UU's love to get into the details, don't we? Both parties almost walked away as a result of whether a sentence should include the words "OUR heritage" or "THE heritage." Really. It was almost a deal breaker. But, we know this story has a happy ending. Both organizations worked out their conflicts, the principles were written and the merger occurred in 1961. Though similar, the principles then weren't written the same as our principles read today. For example, one sounded similar to our current 1st principle:

"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."

Did something there get under your skin just a little? I'll repeat:

"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."

There were more words in the original principles that were not inclusive by today's standards.

One principle referred to the “ideals of brotherhood”

Another “To encourage cooperation with men of good will”

And another referred to:

“the Judeo-Christian heritage as love to God and love to man”

That last one was a double whammy. It not only included sexist language, but narrowed the scope of our religious beliefs.

As the feminist movement grew, many women and men took issue with the principles. UU women’s groups began working towards more inclusive language.

But how does one change our principles? Fortunately, our friends who worked to make the merger a success, were wise to include, in our bylaws, a requirement that the principles be reviewed at least every 15 years.

A rewriting of the principles began in 1981 which cleaned up the sexist language. Among other changes that were made, there was one that became a stickler. There were those who weren’t happy that there was no reference made to our Christian origins. The “Judeo-Christian” references were removed, as well as the word Supreme. After much discussion an agreement was made and the compromise was to replace Supreme with the word “Inherent,” as in “inherent worth and dignity.

I feel confident that most UU’s view the first principle as the cornerstone of our faith. As a gay man, when I heard “to promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person,” I knew I found a place where I belonged.

So, if the word inherent replaced Supreme, does that mean it’s referencing God? The answer is a resounding yes - if that’s what you believe. Others would say, of course not, and that’s okay too. I’ll let you discuss that amongst yourselves.

When people question our first principle, it's usually the word "inherent" that gets in the way. Its very definition states it is a permanent attribute. I quote from Rev. Sean Parker Dennison:

"Inherent worth and dignity is not something we confer upon people when they are good and rescind when they are bad. Inherent worth and dignity is not something that resides in the other, but something that is demanded of us." End Quote.

Rev. Edmund Robinson, summarized it this way:

...[T]he ethical command persists even when the person with whom we are dealing has acted against society's moral codes. That is in fact the test of the ethics. It's easy to recognize someone's worth and dignity when they are like us, or when they are behaving as we think people ought to behave. But when we say that people by their behavior have "forfeited" the right to recognition of their worth and dignity, then we really didn't believe that their worth and dignity was inherent. End Quote

When I began researching for this sermon, my expectation was that I was going to speak enthusiastically about how great our 1st principle is, and how it defines us as a congregation. Once I started, however, I was shocked at what I found in search after search and church after church. The number of sermons in support of our first principle were eclipsed by sermons that questioned its validity.

Many of you may remember about a decade ago, a controversial article by Reverend William Schulz, in our Unitarian Universalist magazine, UU World. It was titled "What Torture Has Taught Me." Rev. Schulz served 8 years as the President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, and then 12 years as head of Amnesty International, certainly this is a man who must have strong feelings about our first principle. Well, he has strong beliefs alright. He said:

"...our doctrines about human nature, such as the Unitarian Universalist Association's affirmation of "the inherent worth and dignity of every person," rest uneasily in a world full of

torturers. In what sense can we defend the notion that a torturer is a person of inherent worth and dignity?"

He continued,

"People who hear of our first principle ask me, "Well, what about Hitler, what about Idi Amin? How about Osama Bin Laden-- do they have inherent worth and dignity?" I answer that I believe that they, like every other person, were born with inherent, innate value and that they chose to violate the human covenant so [badly] that I consider them to have negative worth and no remaining dignity." Wow. That's powerful.

Believing along similar lines, Rev. Elizabeth A. Lerner, Senior Minister at The UU Church of Silver Spring, MD, says:

"In the context of our principles and purposes, I believe that inherent, after all does not mean permanent, does not mean impervious It means two things. One is that worth and dignity are birthright, fundamentally present from the start. After that start, events happen in the course of living and they don't just change our bodies and influence our characters. They offer opportunities to respond, and our responses are choices, and those choices we make can sustain or erode the worth and dignity we were born with. End Quote.

Looking back on my earlier story when I was all alone on my birthday, I had no dignity. I had no sense of worth. I hated everybody and everything equally - including myself. But someone gave me a spark of light that day that made me see things differently.

During that time, I had started working at Trader Joe's. We had many regulars who were there every night because of their busy lives. They would stop by the store on their way home to grab something for dinner, rather than keeping their refrigerators stocked.

On my last AA meeting that awful day, I shared the pain I was feeling. I lamented over the fact that I once ran a multi-million-dollar operation and had over 250 employees. All that was gone. This empty shell of a man was running cash registers, bagging groceries and stocking shelves.

At the end of that AA meeting one of our Trader Joe's regulars pulled me aside and said: "How can you say you're worthless? I see you every day engaging with people, smiling at them, you make them laugh. It may not seem like much, but you do make a difference in their lives even if only for a few minutes. You are far from worthless."

Those words did more than change my outlook that day. They changed my life. He gave me a new point of view. I had a new understanding that little things in life can make a difference.

I'm not here to convince you that you should or should not believe that worth and dignity are inherent. I'm not so sure myself. Talk about it with your fellow congregants. Stir things up and debate a bit.

But you know what? I don't think it matters really. I don't. What I believe matters is that regardless of whether it's true or not, I plan to live as if it is true.

Remember my earlier quote by Rev. Lerner, that "the choices we make can sustain or erode the worth and dignity we were born with?" How we treat others reflects how we treat ourselves. How are your worth and dignity holding up?

I suggest not worrying about Hitler, Mussolini, or Attila the Hun. It's not likely you'll be bumping into any of them at the supermarket. But who will be there? Cashiers, baggers, the person behind the deli counter. Grocery shopping is not fun for a lot of us, so how does that affect you? Do you have blinders on to get out of there as soon as possible, or do you engage these individuals? Do you look them in the eyes? Say hello, and goodbye. Do you refer to them by name? Most people in the service industry wear name tags so it's not hard to do.

My goal today is to encourage you to embrace yourself as having inherent worth, which requires us to treat others the same. Perhaps you'll try this week.

I'm going to start you off with something simple. It's a commitment I made to myself a few years ago. When you take a walk around your neighborhood and another person is walking towards you, do you say hello or do you turn your gaze away to avert making eye contact. How about making a commitment to smile and say "hello," regardless of whether they're looking at you or not. Be careful, you may startle them, but it may make a little difference in their day - I can assure you it will make a difference in yours.

And what about coffee houses? Does this look familiar:

<>Act Out Rude Coffee House Customer<>

I'm not going to ask for the guilty parties in the room, but if this looks like you, then you may want to think hard about whether you are treating that barista with worth and dignity, or are they just a means to an end?

Now, you may be thinking, "Brad, you're just talking about good deeds and being nice to each other? Aren't there more important things to be addressed - the Death Penalty, Immigration Justice, Transgender Rights or Black Lives Matter?" Absolutely, they're important, and I'm proud of where most UU's stand on those issues. I encourage you to join organizations that are working towards justice in those and other matters. But it doesn't have to be either/or. I believe we're most effective in the big picture when we ensure we are also taking care of our little spot here on earth. We need a little more being nice to each other.

Adapting to a new way of thinking is hard, that's why I'm giving simple examples because that's all it takes to get started. Sure, you can run off and work full time for Habitat for Humanity, or move to Kenya to help people have access to clean water. These are wonderful endeavors if

you're up for it, but I'm not going to pretend I have that much influence. What I am going to ask is you pay attention to the little things you do. And for this exercise, you have to pay attention and be aware that you're doing it. Eventually it will become second nature.

I'm sure there's at least one or two people here who has left a note on someone's car because they parked too close, or my personal pet peeve – they took up two parking spaces. Let me be radical and encourage all of you to do the opposite. Leave a note on someone's car, but say something positive. Let's say you see a car with a child's seat in the back. How about a note thanking them for raising the next generation.

Let me go way out on a limb here and suggest sending a card anonymously to someone. Perhaps even someone you don't know. Be creative and say something nice.

There's lots of bumper stickers out there that say to "Practice random acts of kindness." And that's all I'm asking of you. It's all I'm asking of me. I also happen to be talking about the golden rule. You know, "Do unto others as you'd have them do unto you."

I challenge you to consciously do something this week that can make a small difference in someone's day. Just one small thing.

There are millions of ways you can make a difference. There are many books on the subject. Treat everyone you meet as if they have inherent worth and dignity. Do it for them, because you're really doing it for yourself and if there's one thing I know –
you're worth it.