

THE INHERENT WORTH AND DIGNITY OF EVERY PERSON

This is the first service in a series of seven lay-led services dedicated to the seven principles of Unitarian Universalism. Since this is the series debut, I'm going to spend a few minutes giving you a little history and background on our seven principles, before delving into the first principle in more depth.. (I want to acknowledge my sources , upon whom I leaned very heavily, Edward Frost, Marilyn Sewall, and Kenneth Collier, all published by the UUA press.)

You have probably heard that Unitarian Universalists have no creed, that we can each believe whatever we want to believe, or that we can pick and choose from all the other religions. It is true that our emphasis is on diversity, on individual freedom of belief, and on congregational autonomy. Both our Universalist and Unitarian forebears in this country, though, knew that they needed to be able to articulate what their members believed. From the early days, they struggled to express beliefs that would inspire feelings of unity without trampling on individual principles. Our current principles and purposes statement is just the latest attempt at a workable consensus.

In 1803 the Universalists adopted the Winchester Confession (at a convention in Winchester, NH), a statement of belief that with “God’s love and forbearance, all souls will be saved.” This stood in stark relief with the prevailing Calvinist doctrine that some would be saved, others damned, according to God’s inscrutable will. Again in 1899 and in 1935, Universalists adopted new statements of faith, each time in more contemporary language, but always with the belief of universal salvation.

Unitarian history is a bit more convoluted. During its first century on this continent, the goal of the Unitarian Association was to promote “pure Christianity,” untainted by dogma such as the Trinity, the infallibility of scripture, or salvation through the sacrifice of Christ. During that period, however, there was much theological struggle in the movement, with such prominent ministers as Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Ellery Channing, and Theodore Parker adding their voices to the debate. In 1894, after decades of divisions concerning matters of faith, the National Conference of Unitarian Congregations adopted a new statement of belief, but added that all were welcome “who are in general sympathy with our spirit....” From the 1920’s through the 1950’s, the long debate between theists and humanists continued. After World War II, a Unitarian Assoc. committee chaired by the Rev. A. Powell Davies drew up a list of 5 principles, all of which you would recognize in our current list of 7. They were widely accepted, and when Unitarians and Universalists merged in 1961, they were incorporated into the new association’s Statement of Purpose.

The road from 5-7 principles comes directly through Ohio. By the late 70’s, there was much strife and debate surrounding the 5 principles. They had been drafted by men, mostly ministers, and though there had been some gender word changes in the late 60’s

and early 70's, many feminists considered them too patriarchal and hierarchical. Other UUs were concerned about what they considered an over-emphasis on the Judeo-Christian tradition.

To make a long story a bit shorter, a Women and Religion Resolution was passed unanimously at the 1977 General Assembly, and in 1979 a conference was held at the Grailville Conference Center in Loveland, Ohio, near Cincinnati. At GA in 1981 in Philadelphia, a proposed amendment to revise the principles threatened our movement, with strife centered on such issues as eliminating the word "God," on including the three major positions – theist, humanist, and Christian -, as well as on what proved to be less controversial, the changes proposed by the Grailville conference related to patriarchy. A coalition was formed with the goal of reconciliation, and several years and countless meetings later, the 1984 General Assembly here in Columbus gave preliminary approval to a new statement, divided into the two sections we currently use, Principles, and Sources. It received final approval in 1985 in Atlanta.

And now, the 1st principle, **The Inherent Worth and Dignity of Every Person.**

This first principle, with its emphasis on the individual, along with the 7th principle – "respect for the interdependent web of all existence – with its universal emphasis, really frame our UU principles. The first principle is truly human-centered, and to indulge in an historical approach just a little longer, it really comes out of the liberal side of the Protestant Reformation, which was born of the Renaissance – that great socio-cultural-religious revolution that changed the way we Westerners saw ourselves and the world. It was at this time that people started to see themselves as having individual worth and dignity. You can follow the development of this concept through our UU ancestors – the Socinians in 16th and 17th century Poland, King John Sigismund in Transylvania, all the way to Norbert Capek in Prague from the 1920's until his death at Dachau during WWII.

The first principle sounds very good, a no-brainer. Who would challenge the concept of the inherent worth and dignity of every person? After all, if I get to choose whom to respect, then others would too...and some might not choose me! To be serious, the first principle, though, challenges us in many ways, and I'm going to list them for you, and then go back to consider how each of these challenges plays out in our daily lives.

Challenges:

1. To respect others enough never to objectify and control them in the service of ideology.
2. To unfold according to our true and authentic nature, to live with integrity.
3. Not to create a hierarchy of value where some are more worthy than others.
4. To focus on living on this earth, here, now, or as Thoreau said, "one world at a time."
5. To create justice where it does not now exist.
6. To distinguish between individual worth and individual behavior.
7. To acknowledge that there are questions and contradictions.
8. To be gentle, honest, and forgiving.

And now to revisit each of these challenges....

1. To respect others enough never to objectify and control them in the service of ideology. For me, this first means not to reduce others to their most obvious beliefs or behaviors, not to stereotype them. Take, for example, the so-called religious right. As a socio-political liberal, and certainly as a gay man, it is easy for me to reduce this group, which is not really a group, to their lowest common denominator...to stereotype them as people who interpret the bible literally, who are anti-choice, anti-peace, anti-justice, anti-gay, hate mongers – responsible for a plethora of injustices, including the recent murders of such people as Matthew Shepard, a gay college student killed by homophobes in Wyoming, or James Byrd, Jr., an African American murdered by White supremacists in Texas. Such thinking is blind, for example, to the loving social justice efforts of many individuals and groups who are conservative Christians. Of course, at the same time, I ask religious conservatives not to objectify me, as evil for example, and not to try to control me with laws that reflect their ideologies.

2. To unfold according to our true and authentic nature, to live with integrity. The principle that every person is, in fact, worthy, challenges us to find our true nature, to develop it, and to live openly and honestly as that person. It calls us to our very best, to redeem the promise of our birth. When I am not honest with myself, when I settle for second best, when I am physically, intellectually, emotionally, or spiritually lazy, I am not living this principle. I think it was my belief in this principle that allowed me to accept being gay, when many of my contemporaries struggled with their own sense of worth. Despite feeling okay about myself, however, I did not know what to do about the heterosexual marriage and family in which I found myself. Eventually, I think this 1st principle challenged me to be true to myself, to live with integrity as my authentic self, and to find a way to do that.

3. Not to create a hierarchy of value where some are more worthy. The first principle asks us to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. This does not mean the worth and dignity only of people with whom we agree, but of all people. It does not mean the worth and dignity only of intelligent people who are willing to engage in rational and civil conversations, but all people. In other words, this includes people whose beliefs and behavior are abhorrent to us, people whom we consider dangerous, even people who would deny our rights and freedoms. This is a hard one for me! This principle challenges me not to consider those whose political and religious beliefs are different than mine as inferior...and believe me, in today's world, that is a real challenge for me!

4. To focus on living on this earth, here, now. Since the first principle is so human-centered, it suggests that we should dedicate our time and energy to living this life well. From a religious point of view, this is an easy one for most UUs. In general, we do not believe in a traditional heaven or after-life, but rather that our rewards and punishments come here in this lifetime. The challenge for most of us is at an everyday level, to fight the very human tendency to live in the future. How often are you waiting for the class (or sermon) to end, or to get through this day, or to get to the weekend, or for the next

vacation, or until the kids are old enough for school, or until the kids are finished with school, or until you retire, or until your partner retires, and so forth? I think the first principle asks us to focus our attention on the only thing we have, the present.

5. To create justice where it does not now exist. If all people have worth and dignity, how can we tolerate a world where some live with inadequate nourishment, without safe water, with substandard or no housing, without a decent education, without health insurance or high quality medical care, and so forth....in other words, without hope? Or how can we accept a world where the playing field is not even, where all people are not born equal, where people are disenfranchised because of the color of their skin, the language they speak, their religious beliefs, or whom they love? The first principle challenges us to work for social justice, for a better world.

6. To distinguish between individual worth and individual behavior. This is the most frequently voiced challenge to the first principle. Whenever I tell someone that I am writing a sermon on this topic, they mention Hitler. I usually add Pol Pot, Slobodan Milosevic, and others. "Every person" includes both the victims and the perpetrators, in other words, it includes the batterers, the abusers, the murderers, the child molesters, the rapists, the mass murderers, and yes, Hitler. Do I really believe that worth and dignity exist in these people? I do, in the sense that inherent worth is independent of what we choose to do with our lives, that inherent worth cannot be extinguished by our behavior, as heinous as that behavior may be. A less dramatic example of this challenge can be seen in our church, and other organizations and institutions of which we are a part....In the name of respect for individual freedom, we can at times be absurdly tolerant of individual behavior that should not be allowed because it is destructive of the community at large. We sometimes allow unhealthy individuals to exert undue influence, because in our dedication to accept individual differences we do not distinguish between individual worth and individual behavior.

7. To acknowledge that there are, and always will be, questions and contradictions. This is another big one, and to be truthful, I have to say that it applies to all of life, not just the first principle. Understanding that life is full of questions and contradictions is a prerequisite for maturity, in my opinion. Many of us firmly support a woman's freedom of choice about her own reproductive life, including her right to terminate an unwanted pregnancy. If every life is worthy, however, what about the choice to terminate a fetus because it has Down's Syndrome? Another example – some UUs support the death penalty in certain cases. Does committing an atrocious crime cause a human being to lose his/her human status, that is, to lose individual worth?

8. And finally, to be gentle, honest, and forgiving. At the most basic level, the first principle speaks about our relationships with others. It challenges us to be gentle and loving, to listen with empathy and compassion when that is what is needed. Sometimes it asks me to speak truths that are painful to myself or others, or to hold others and myself accountable for our actions, or even to take risks, physical or emotional. This principle challenges me also to be forgiving, to understand, to quote Brenda Flyswithawks, my Tsulagi (Cherokee) friend, that we are all just "pitiful two-leggeds." In addition to

admitting that I have been wrong, this means believing in the possibility of redemption...not necessarily in the Christian sense, where humans are redeemed by Jesus' sacrifice, but redemption in the sense of fulfilling a promise – the redeeming promise of worth and dignity in every person.