

Who Has Worth and Dignity?  
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Who has worth and dignity? Most Unitarian Universalist kids will tell you that's a silly question. Each and every person is important.

It is probably our most well known principle. "We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: The inherent worth and dignity of every person".

Several years ago, I was the Director of Religious Education for a congregation that had 60 kids in the Youth Religious Education program every Sunday. For a while I was lead teacher for the pre-schoolers. That group was full of 4 and 5 year olds that always seemed to me, to "get" this principle.

Those children easily affirmed that every person on this planet is worthy, valuable simply because they exist. I thought they "got" it because their worlds were small and they were very big in their small worlds! It seemed to me that the "natural" self-centeredness of primary age kids that made this principle one they could easily grasp!

I was amused when I heard some of the other teachers trying to use the first principle as a way to get the children to share toys and crayons. For these children the first principle didn't translate as a way to get them to be less than thoroughly self-centered!

I noticed that it was around age 12, when pre-adolescent kids are beginning to understand how big the world really is that this principle starts to change from a statement about the way things are, to the way things should be.

Most of the 12 year olds thought that worth and dignity "should" be affirmed for every person, but they knew it wasn't a principle that reflected their realities. If you've experienced pre-teens, you know they can simultaneously be very perceptive about the failure of should and the need for ideals all at the same time!

During the teen years critical reasoning starts kicking in. I loved to sit in on teen conversations and hear how they were wrestling with the meaning of this principle. I have often heard UU teens telling each other that "inherent" means that even though every person who is born has value, a person can do terrible things, can cause such harm to others that one can lose the value they were born with. I have heard UU teens wrestle with the meaning of "inherent", the same way that other teens wrestle with the meaning of "original".

I have heard UU teens reason that if a person has fallen from an inherent state of worthiness because of a harmful act they have committed, or if they belong to a group that has committed a harmful act, then it is ok to stop treating that person as if they have value, because they no longer do. Teens are focused on finding what group they "belong" to, accessing where they "fit".

When I hear them struggle with understanding the first principle, I always wonder what is going on in their universe that has moved them from generous sense of self-centeredness, to what is, perhaps, a much smaller sense of power in a much bigger world.

Teens are always alert for qualifiers and exceptions to all kinds of “principles”. They test “authority” and standards. And, they are constantly measuring themselves against others, making judgments about their relative “worth”.

They will spend a great deal of energy in their formative years seeking to process discrepancies, assessing who they are and where they belong. Knowing that teens and young adults are “in process”, moving towards integration and identity formation, I remain eager to hear how they are incorporating this principle into their worldview.

However, I am not always so eager to hear adults, especially those who have been UU’s for a while, continue to question and qualify the first principle. I have heard adults proclaim that believing that every person has worth and dignity is just too naïve, too reflective of an innocent, unknowing state...I have heard adults say that this principle won’t work as a guideline for living in the real world.

When I hear adults qualify the first principle, ...I wonder what is going on in their world.

What I have heard from some adult UUs goes something like this...Every person may have been born with “inherent” worth, but ...some horrible, harmful act they have committed can cause that person to forfeit the privilege of being treated as if they possess worth and dignity... (It is OK to torture a known enemy. It is OK to kill during war; it is OK to aggressively retaliate for a harm done. It is OK to deny/ignore/disrespect basic human rights for “illegal” immigrants. etc.)

I try to understand what’s going on when I hear this. I try to understand why a person who calls themselves UU would feel so separated from oneness with the rest of humanity, how it is that that UU can justify treating another human being as less than human. I try to understand what is going on when an adult UU separates the worthy from the un-worthy. I always wonder what part of themselves have they become separated from? What internal devaluing of self is going on? Where and when did they become so much smaller than they used to be?

Most of the kids that I worked with several years ago were growing up in families that were very privileged. They had plenty to eat, plenty of toys and clothes. They were fundamentally safe. They were receiving excellent educations. They were treated with love and respect. Even if their parents were or had experienced some of life’s harsh realities, they were doing their best to protect their children and to give them lives of privilege and ease.

Soon enough, those children would leave their cocoons of comfort. I watched as these privileged teens grew up and begin to understand that there are those who have never known the kind of comfort and safety that they had known. These young people were motivated to extend what they had known to those who had not known such privilege. They wanted others to know and to have what they had.

Many UU's are motivated by a sense of their own privilege to extend the privileges they have known to others. Many of us are motivated to extend our democratic and economic freedoms into the rest of the world. We UU's think of it as just good citizenship to want all of the inhabitants in the universe to have a vote that counts, to have an equitable measure of economic power to buy what is needed for basic human dignity.

I used to think the equalization of "privilege" was an appropriate way to interpret and fulfill our first principle. I used to think our first principle was just a restatement of the American way, that at least in theory, most privileged Americans could easily agree with.

Going through my own developmental stages perhaps, my understanding of what affirming and promoting "the inherent worth and dignity of all persons" means has changed.

I know that every child does not grow up with a big sense of themselves in a small, safe world. If affirming the worth and dignity of all persons, is about extending the privileges I have enjoyed to every person on the planet, then it is just a new kind of paternalism. Somewhere along the way, I am going to reject, "that I should share my toys", especially if my toys are refused. If I am coming at this principle as a way that makes my toys more valuable and me more generous, it isn't going to work!

In fact, affirming the inherent worth and dignity of all beings may mean sacrificing my privileges.

What I have come to believe is that this principle is not about that.

I have come to believe that the question that is being addressed by the first principle is how might I be in solidarity with those who are denied worth and dignity.

This is the question for those of us seeking maturity as UU's. Moving from a sense of our individuality, to a sense of what group we belong to, to a universal inter-relatedness...we are always processing towards a deeper sense of worthiness and purpose.

We UU's are fond of saying we respect the value of every person. Yet, often, what we mean is, if you are enough like me, I will give you respect. .

A maturing UU faith calls us to accept a more radical interpretation.

Perhaps it is easy to affirm the worth and dignity of all beings...when ours has been affirmed.

Yet our first principle doesn't say..."we covenant to affirm and promote the worth and dignity of every person because our worth and dignity has been affirmed and promoted".

I usually rely on circles...circular thought, webs of inter-relatedness...One of our sources reminds us of the Jewish and Christian teachings that calls us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves. For some of us responding to God's love is the motivation that causes us to love others. That is the circle within which we locate ourselves. We love because we were loved. If we love, we will be loved.

Yet some of us no longer believe there is a “God” who loves. Some of us have no sense of an ultimate force of love to which to respond.

What if it is just us and our projections ...just us...human beings inhabiting this planet, with no ultimate guarantees that come from beyond? What if it is just us?

The first principle is stripped down to the most absolute affirmation we must make. All else flows from this principle, this is the beginning place in our religion, in our faith community.

It is not ultimately a response. It is a beginning.

The first principle is not a prescribed reaction. It isn't a “should”. Rather, it stands alone as the most basic affirmation we can make about what makes this life worth living. The first principle is a “what is”...statement...a comment on the nature of being...

I am no longer an innocent child. I know real harm exists and I know that even in the “beloved” community there are harms that have been and will be done. I will do what I can to protect my loved ones from harm. I will bring those who do harm to justice. I will take measures to prevent harm from being done by those who are incapable or unwilling to modify their destructive behaviors.

At the same time, I know that the most basic affirmation I can make...from which all my commitments flow is the absolute affirmation of the worth and dignity of all beings. For me it is not a response to a loving God, or a loving parent, or any amount of love I have felt.

It is rather, the beginning point.

Events in our lives make it incredibly difficult to believe in the basic goodness of humanity.

The first principle is not a moral assessment. It is not a claim that human nature is basically good. It is not an attempt to condone terrible acts of violence or to passively accept the inevitability of evil. Instead it is an active assertion that a human being, virtuous or not, good or evil, possesses a value that cannot be taken from them—it's a condition of our very humanity to believe this.

Affirming the first principle is not a simple or easy. We do not affirm it as often as we think we do. It is hard to see others worth and dignity when we or our loved ones have been harmed. It is difficult to honor and care for every person...

Living by this principle requires voluntary, individual choice and practice. It requires thinking, maturing adults who can and will choose to affirm that all beings have worth and dignity without condition or exception, especially in the most difficult and during the darkest moments. Our first principle is about choosing a starting point that informs everything else....

Every person on this planet is worthy, valuable simply because they exist.