

“The Inherent Worth and Dignity of Every Person:
Our Impossible Belief?”

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Fayetteville

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October 21, 2007

I was listening to the radio a while back. Or perhaps I should say the radio was on while I was doing something else. The dial, as usual, was set to NPR. What I heard was a snatch from an interview -- it was probably Terri Gross and Fresh Air -- with a man who had been homeless for quite a few years. Now he was back among the rest of us; he had returned to more respectable society.

The thought of him came back to me later, when I was thinking about the meaning of our affirmation:

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:

The inherent worth and dignity of every person . . .

Of every person. This man on the radio, the formerly homeless man: not only now, but back when he was living on the street, this man, like the rest of us, is a person of worth and dignity.

Can you buy that? Or is this our “impossible belief”? Our answer to the implausible doctrine of the virgin birth of Jesus?

Here’s a little story I saw in the newspaper a while back. It’s from the New York Times’ Metropolitan Diary column.

After church one recent weekend, four of us stopped for lunch at a neighborhood restaurant. It was busy and bustling, but the staff knows us, so we found a good table right in the middle.

As we were enjoying ourselves, the friend on my right and I noticed a man who had taken great care to make his tattered clothes look spiffy. He had finished his meal and was searching one pocket after another for enough dollar bills to pay for his lunch.

He was becoming increasingly frantic as he seemed to realize that he did not have enough money to cover the check.

My friend got up quietly as if going to the restroom and in passing the man’s table, leaned down, pretending to find a \$10 bill on the floor. It was done so naturally that when my friend offered the bill to the distracted man, the man’s whole body language changed.

He said, “thank you, thank you. I was sure I had that bill.”

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He was beaming. My friend smiled warmly and walked away.

I've been thinking of this ever since. My friend did a great kindness, not because of the \$10 gift, but because the man was treated with gentleness, caring and respect, and not given charity. [New York Times, Metropolitan Diary, Dec. 30, 2002]

The friend treated the man, the man in tattered but spiffy clothes, he treated him as a person of worth and dignity.

Here's another vignette from the Metropolitan Diary.

William Primavera was in a delicatessen when he heard the counterman complain about the weird day he was having. It had started, the counterman said, with a fellow who came in and asked the price of a turkey sandwich.

Told it was \$4, the man said, "then just sell me two ounces of turkey and throw in two slices of bread."

At this point, another customer, who identified himself as an airport limo driver, joined in. "My day hasn't been much better," he said. "This morning, I picked up a woman who was going to Kennedy airport and on the way, the radio dispatcher told me that her flight had been delayed. When I told her, she said, 'but what about first class?'" [New York Times, Metropolitan Diary, July 29, 2002]

Yes, even those who think they have special entitlements, who think that going first class means they should be immune from the frustrations and losses that are the fate of us ordinary mortals, even such people, we affirm, are persons of worth and dignity.

And don't forget Terri Schiavo. She was the brain-damaged Florida woman who remained in a persistent vegetative state for more than 15 years. Did she -- and others in similar situations -- retain worth and dignity?

We affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person. What does that mean? If anything.

If we look around – not in this room, of course, but out in the world – if we look around, we will see a lot of folks who don't seem to have much worth or dignity at all. We can all identify the morally irresponsible, the parasites, the inherently clueless. We can all identify low life and scum, people who seem totally evil.

Do you remember Dennis Rader? He was convicted a couple of years ago as the serial killer, the BTK killer. He terrorized Wichita, Kansas, for three decades, torturing his victims before he killed them. He was convicted and won't be eligible for parole for 173 years. [Wikipedia biography]

If the inherent worth and dignity principle is meant to be an empirical statement, it certainly seems implausible.

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But let's try a different approach. Don't take it as an empirical statement, as a statement describing people. Perhaps it will work better as a principle that gives us moral guidance. Let's take a look.

I'm against capital punishment. I can frame an argument against capital punishment on the foundation of the inherent worth and dignity principle. But, likewise, I could, if I were so inclined, use the inherent worth and dignity principle to add weight to an argument in favor of capital punishment.

Think again of Douglas Rader, the Wichita serial killer. Of course he was entitled in court to the presumption of innocence. But if the police had the right man, perhaps the only way to recognize his worth and to allow him dignity would be to execute him, or perhaps to allow him the opportunity to take his own life.

And then there are end of life issues, which takes us back to Terri Schiavo. Her husband wanted her to be allowed to die. Her parents insisted that she be kept alive, which required a feeding tube. Whose view should prevail in such situations? Should she be kept alive? Should she be allowed to die? Or perhaps it's better say, should we acknowledge that, in an important sense, she was already dead?

Our starting point in addressing such situations, in my view, is the recognition that Terri Schiavo and others in her situation remain persons of worth and dignity. But that doesn't make the decision any easier. The Vatican declared in September that the preservation of human dignity requires care givers to use feeding tubes. [*Christian Century*, Oct. 16, 2007, p. 5] The *Christian Century*, in its current issue, editorializes in favor of the opposite view, arguing that "to perpetuate a life that is not responsive in any human way, and that has no prospect of becoming such, does not [necessarily] protect human dignity." Both sides in the Schiavo case – parents and the Vatican on one side, Terri's husband and the *Christian Century* on the other – both sides appeal to the inherent worth and dignity principle.

Should we toss out the first of our principles? Should we discard this idea that everyone has inherent worth and dignity? It doesn't square with the facts; it doesn't answer the tough questions. Who needs it?

Let's step back for a moment and look at this question historically and theologically.

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There was in Christianity a strong strain – indeed, it was a dominant strain in the past. It proclaimed that humanity is bad, evil, fallen, lost. We’re headed straight to hell. We deserve nothing so much as punishment, eternal punishment, according to this view. We all inherit the original sin of Adam and Eve, who disobeyed the clear command -- though perhaps a silly one -- the clear command of God not to eat a certain fruit. Only through God’s mercy, it was said, can we, or at least some of us, avoid the hell that we deserve. Only through the grace of God can we be saved.

But there were those in 18th century America, those who in the next century would be known as Unitarians and Universalists, who didn’t buy this. While they didn’t deny the presence of scoundrels among us, they had a more cheerful, optimistic view of human nature and the human condition. We’re not that bad, they said, and we have within us the potential to be a lot better.

And, they said, we don’t see God the way the pessimists do. The way we read the good news announced by Jesus, the way we understand the world, God is a loving God. We humans are *all* made in the image of God, as the Bible tells us in the first chapter of Genesis. We’re all made in the image of God – that is, we’re likenesses to that which is most perfect, most good, most noble. That is our potential.

Our theology may have evolved since then. The Bible may no longer have the same authority for us that it had for our forebears. We may consider their view of God quaint, at best. But we have inherited their view of humanity. We affirm the inherent worth and dignity of humanity. We do not deserve hell. We do not need a special salvation.

In fact, I see a special role for us humans. The universe is a large and lonely place. Very large and very lonely. The universe lacks consciousness; it lacks awareness of itself. It’s just there, mindlessly, pointlessly expanding. We’re the ones, we humans, we provide the universe a consciousness, an awareness of itself. We humans provide the universe a meaning, a purpose. We humans provide the universe a conscience, a moral understanding.

Now I’m not sure what all this means, perhaps it’s just amateur, back-of-the-envelope theology, based on willful ignorance of cosmology and astrophysics. But consider, over the next week, how it feels to think of ourselves in these terms – to think that we humans are what gives the universe self-awareness, meaning, and moral understanding.

Here’s how Annie Dillard puts it:

We are here to abet creation and to witness to it,
to notice each other’s beautiful face and complex nature
so that creation need not play to an empty house. [*Singing the Living Tradition*, #420]

“So that creation need not play to an empty house.”

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The inherent dignity and worth principle is not an empirical hypothesis. We're not waiting for the historians and sociologists and psychologists to bring us their findings.

Nor is the inherent worth and dignity principle the key that will solve the most challenging and frustrating moral dilemmas.

But it does help us, the inherent worth and dignity principle does help us, as we look at other people and at ourselves.

Here's another little story. It's a story about Jesus, and it's from the Bible. Jesus has been working pretty hard; a lot of folks have been after him for cures and miracles; they've been asking him a lot of questions, trying to catch him up in inconsistencies. He needs time off; he wants to get away. Here it is, from the Gospel according to Mark:

24 ¶ From there [probably Gennesaret] Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice,
25 but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.
26 Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin.

That is, the woman wasn't a Jew. From Jesus' point of view, she was a stranger, a foreigner.

She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

27 He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Now that sentence may not make much sense. "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." What Jesus means here is that the Jews, Jesus' own people, come first. They're the children. Foreigners are likened to dogs, not a very flattering analogy, given the status of dogs in their culture. Don't take the children's food, that is, don't take what belongs to the Jews, and give it – throw it, Jesus says – to the dogs, to foreigners. Let's go back to the text:

28 But she answered him,

this woman talked back to a man; this foreigner talked back to a Jew; this common person talked back to the one the gospel writer identifies as the Son of God! Here's what she said:

"Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

We foreigners, she tells Jesus, shouldn't be totally excluded.

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29 Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter."

30 So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. [Mark 7:24-30]

The woman talks back to Jesus. He listens to her. He realizes that she is right: his view was too narrow, he should recognize the common humanity of Jew and Gentile alike. Jesus has been taught a lesson about the inherent worth and dignity of *all* people.

When you are with friends or neighbors who accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, but who are behaving badly toward poor immigrants, or speaking disparagingly about gays, for example, ask them if they remember the story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman.

So let us look at ourselves and look at our neighbors, and recognize our common humanity.

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This was brought home to me a few years ago when I spent a couple of weeks in South Africa, with other students from Wesley Seminary. South Africa is about as far away from Philadelphia -- where Kerry and I were living at the time -- as you can go without getting closer again, or so it seemed on the plane ride that took us there.

The people there, most of the people, had lived under decades of oppression. There are other people there who had lived, under the old regime, as oppressors. There are people who live in a poverty that is unimaginable here. There are people who live in a luxury that would rank high on an international scale. The nation suffers from the AIDS epidemic. Signs of the fear of crime are everywhere. South Africa is in mourning today for Lucky Dube, one of their best known musicians, who was murdered on Friday in an apparent carjacking.

Uncertainty is not far beneath the surface: Can this experiment in democracy and reconciliation succeed, following generations of inequality and oppression?

But the people there, black and white, rich and poor, are pretty much like people here, and everywhere. I was amazed at how quickly we Americans could relate easily and even deeply with those who might appear to be so different.

It's easier, I should think, to recognize shared humanity, to recognize worth and dignity, in people that you can see, meet, talk to, perhaps even dance with, than in people who do not exist. Let me mention two groups who are *not* with us, who do *not* exist.

First are the missing women in Asia. In India, for example, millions of women aren't there. The women are missing. Societal norms give preference to boys over girls. Parents want a boy baby rather than a girl baby. And technology today lets them have their wish.

Between technology that facilitates selective abortion and social practices that give boys a better chance of survival than girls, the result in India is a surplus of men and a shortage of women.

Future generations, to go on to the second example, future generations still await their turn. Will our grandchildren – and their grandchildren – have a home on this planet? The combination of overpopulation and reckless technological development has created the risk that our descendants may not be able to find a home on this planet. We can no longer ignore the effects of what we do. Global warming is real.

Of course, sometimes it's easier, or it seems easier, to recognize one's shared humanity with someone on a different continent than with someone across the room. We rarely have to interact with the person across the ocean, but the person across the room is hard to avoid. Likewise, sometimes it's easier to debate and bemoan large and apparently insoluble problems than it is to look our neighbor in the eye.

So, for the moment, let's keep it in the room, in *this* room. We form a loving community here. A community of faith, where we honor and respect one another. Where we see *in one another* hidden gifts. Where we can laugh with one another. Where we can speak directly to one another. Where we are not afraid of disagreement, but know that with the solid foundation we share, we can trust one another.

And we are a community that looks outward as well as inward. We welcome the next person who comes through our doors in search – perhaps not knowing what they are searching for, but realizing, as we have before them, that in coming here, they have come home. We care for those in the wider community whose lives have been restricted by poverty, racism, or mental illness. We speak out for justice, for we know that we live in a very small, very interdependent world, where no one can fully enjoy the blessings of peace and justice unless *all* do.

My friends, let us be proud of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Fayetteville, a religious community that proclaims and embodies what the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association have covenanted to affirm and promote: “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” So may it be.