

Dignity (The First Principle)

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The first of our 7 principles states that we, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalists Association, covenant to affirm and promote, “*The inherent worth and dignity of every person.*” Sounds wonderful right. I agree. People have said to me that for them this First Principle is also the most difficult of the principles to put into practice, especially since we now have a new president and a new administration.

Let’s unpack this first principle for a moment to see what it is that we are affirm. Let’s look at the word “covenant”. The word means an agreement, by lease or deed or other legal contract. To promise by.

The Hebrew First Testament, sometimes referred to as the “Old” Testament definition is an elected, as opposed to natural, relationship of obligation under oath. So it is a chosen relationship.

The word, *inherent*, has several phrases to define its meaning---***intrinsic; existing as an essential characteristic belonging to nature; Existing in something or someone as a permanent and inseparable element, quality, or attribute.***

Now let’s unpack the word, *worth*. ***The quality that renders something or someone desirable, useful, or valuable.*** Finally, we have the word *dignity*. ***Dignity means: The quality or state of being worthy of esteem or respect. Poise and self respect.***

Now for me, some of these definitions are of course very subjective as to who gets to decide who is worthy, or valuable, desirable, etc, but you get the gist of what is being said when the words are being used. Yet I would go so far as to say that this first principle is the very one that defines us as UU’s. One does not be “saved” or to agree with our outlook or philosophy of life to garner our respect and approval. It is already there because you and I are alive and sharing this planet together as flawed human beings who are fearfully and wonderfully made.

Dignity for me means to recognize, to acknowledge, to affirm that you are, and I am, *Somebody*. This sense of, “somebodyness,” if you will, will reflect our connectedness in how you interact with me and how I interact with you. Or should I say, how we choose to interact or to relate to one another. To be treated with dignity is the most basic of human rights for it is not something that one has to earn or to study for. Yet in a utilitarian, xenophobic, hyper color conscious culture such as ours, it is no small task to maintain a sense of this thing we call dignity. To take what life has to offer toe to toe can sometimes appear to be just a trifle difficult. It can be very difficult to maintain a sense of self after being knocked down a few times by life, and there may be times that the words from Mya Angelou’s poem entitled, *...And Still I Rise...* may seem to some a bit too

unrealistic. Perhaps there are burdens that may be too heavy to bear. To live and to live well is serious business. To live with a sense of humanity, authenticity, and dignity can be at times appear to be not only unrealistic but scary as well.

To attempt to live a life of authenticity, to try to be a better person today than you were yesterday---this is dignity. To walk with one's head up, not in a haughty way but in way that says that I am somebody and have a right to be here is crucial. We want to give our children this sense of "somebodyness." After all, Dr. King reminds us that a person can't ride your back unless it is bent. To have and to affirm that one has human dignity (as well as that others possess this dignity as well) is to acknowledge that one's life counts, that one's contributions, no matter how small, are acknowledged and mirrored back to you. Why?

Because I can only salute in you what I can salute in myself. This is the meaning of the word "Nameste." The divinity, the humanness in me perceives, respects, and acknowledges what is human in you. Who would argue that in our culture today, on the whole planet for that matter, that many people feel as if they do not count; that they are merely cogs in a huge wheel and are not fully appreciated. Life is simply a tale of sound and fury signifying nothing.

A common theme in all human rights movements is this notion of dignity. Ask any GLBTQ brother or sister about being treated (or not) with dignity in today's culture and they will give you an earful. In her book, Touching Our Strength: The Erotic As Power and The Love of God, Theologian Carter Heyward writes, *Coming out is a relational process associated with lesbian and gay men's public affirmation of themselves in relation to others. This affirmation is powerful. This power is sacred because it is shared. It is transforming because it is creative. This power is liberating because it moves the struggle for justice. This power causes one to break out of isolation imposed by silence and invisibility (Heyward, p. 21)* I would also add that this power acknowledges the inherent worth and dignity of the individual and the group. I would also add that this power is ultimately about love! The emergence of protests such as Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, and Standing Rock, are concerned with enacting visions of human dignity. These protests have provided opportunities for us to renew our commitment to the common good and have invited us to learn from others and to transform suffering through collaboration.

But it isn't easy. Our market driven culture denigrates the dignity, the very humanity of the human being. We are nothing more than consumers. People have become for quite some time now mere commodities to be used and disregarded, disrespected, and dismantled to become mere merchandise, mere things.

Society's mottos have become, **suspect** your neighbor as yourself, along with the 11th commandment, thou shalt not get caught. Do unto others before they do unto you. America says that it adheres to the Judeo/Christian heritage. In a way she is correct in an ironic sort of way. A profit does lead us. It's spelled P-R-O-F-I-T. We need to be reminded that you cannot say that you are a religious anything when you can look at

another human being as if they were a horse (I have nothing against horses or any other members of the animal kingdom but you get my drift).

When the Jewish theologian Martin Buber spoke and wrote about an I-Thou Relationship, he was simply noting that other human beings are extensions of ourselves. No, not in any narcissistic sort of way, but other people are not objects to be discarded after use.

The concept of dignity is an extremely radical concept because it has a powerful spirit behind it that essentially says, don't write me off, for the contradictions of life are not final. Philosopher Immanuel Kant talked about not dehumanizing other folk as a means to an end. Why? Because they are autonomous and have dreams and aspirations just like you and me which makes them precious.

The 8th century Hebrew prophets knew this which is why the politicians and governments of their time hated to see them coming. Sojourner Truth knew this when she declared, "Ain't I a woman?" John Brown knew it and paid the ultimate price for this knowledge. UUs Elizabeth Cady Stanton knew it, as did UU ministers William E. Channing and Theodore Parker. James Reeb knew it as well. Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull knew it as did Sequoyah.

You and I know it too! Folks working in sweatshops know it. All Human rights groups know it---it's all about dignity. Living and dying with it. When my father was dying he mentioned on a few occasions that he just wanted to die with some dignity. The people in Harlem and Appalachia know about it as well. The Hebrew and African American slaves answered the prophet Jeremiah's query, Is there no balm in Gilead? The all answered in the affirmative! We are the balm right here in this church. We UUs. As humanist, atheist, agnostic, and theist. As UU Christians, and Goddess worshipers, earth centered spiritualist, in a society where the assault on one's dignity can be relentless, we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of each and every person.

You see to possess "inherent" worth and dignity means that you have a right to be here, a place at the table and there is nothing you need to do to earn it. You just have to take your seat at the table and to just be. That is enough because you are enough.

Let's bring it down to basics for a moment now. The great mystic and theologian Howard Thurman talked about his struggle with learning acceptance and love for other human beings. I recall listening to a tape of one of his sermons and he was candid about the fact that there were just some people that he did not want to love. He said that at that time he was spiritually mature enough in his life to be able to love like this. He said that his constant prayer was that he wished only to be willing to be willing to love. He was not yet ready to love to that depth but he prayed to at least be willing to be willing to love. Perhaps this is what we must meditate and/or pray for, for our own good will and acceptance of others. Let us be at least willing to be willing.

We live in a moment unprecedented in human history, at least this is what I believe. Why is it different? Because in the words of the late great Indian sage, J. Krishnamurti, we are dealing not only with economics but ideas.

We are quarreling about ideas, ideas that justify murder. Everywhere in the world, he says that we are justifying murder as a means to righteous ends. Krishnamurti wrote about this back in 1954 in a book entitled, *The First and Last Freedom*. It's a classic. Now, he's certainly not the first person to talk about this but I like the way he frames it. Justifying murder as a means to a righteous end is unprecedented in human history.

There was a time when murder was seen for what it was, but now murder is seen as a means to achieve a noble result, and this includes the attempted murder of the human spirit, which I don't believe can actually occur but it can be attempted.

Murder is accepted as righteous because we are being told by leaders that this murder will benefit all of human kind. In this way we sacrifice the present for the future.

Dr. King puts it this way, "The ways in which we live have outdistanced the means for which we live." This is the great problem facing us today as human beings. The implication is that wrong means will produce a right end and you justify the means through ideation. This ideation has led to the exploitation of other human beings. This is extremely dangerous as we are seeing now.

We have really learned the power of propaganda and alternative facts and fake news. To use these ideas as a tool of transformation of human beings is extremely dangerous. Human beings are not important but systems, and ideas have become important. As long as the result is justified by ideas we can destroy millions upon millions of sentient beings and the earth.

War is not a means to peace. There is no such thing as "peacekeeping missiles" or jumbo shrimp. Yet war is intellectually justified as a means of bringing peace. The other danger Krishnamurti talks about is the extraordinary importance human beings give to property, the pleasure of the senses, to social class, to nationalism, and to religious labels and beliefs. We are closer to a nuclear midnight than ever before and if we want to keep on getting what we are getting all we have to do is keep on doing what we are doing. Every political and economic decision is dragging us close to the abyss. Therefore the crisis is unprecedented and requires unprecedented action.

It must take place now and not tomorrow. Is it possible to change now? Is it possible to change oneself in the immediate, in the now? I agree with Krishnamurti that we can change now, but I must add the hour is getting late. The porch light cannot and will not remain on much longer.

That transformation comes into being only when you and I as individuals begin to be aware of ourselves and who we are in every thought, word, and deed.

The inauguration of our new emperor is straining each of these beliefs to new limits. We are living in a turbulent time when it will be difficult to live these principles as a regimen of resilience, a means of maintaining inner balance against the shock waves rippling across our social landscape. We will need to continue to join with progressive leaders of other faiths who share our convictions, advocating together on behalf of human decency and in defense of our embattled democratic experiment.

Yet we must call on, in unison, for a policy of global generosity instead of a deadly militarism, for programs that protect the poor and vulnerable, for the advancement of social and racial justice, and for the rapid transition to a clean energy economy.

So this morning whatever you believe in, God or no god, or don't know and don't care. Whatever or whoever you believe in, may it lift you from limitation and may you remember all that you are. I honor and respect yours and my dignity and yours, mine, and everyone's right to be here. The story goes that at one time someone asked the Hindu Sage Ramana Maharishi how we should treat others? His response—there are not others!

This is the creed of our denomination and long may it be so! Amen and Amen.