

To Be Worthy
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Our first Unitarian Universalist principle tells us we all have inherent worth and dignity. The language of this principle evolved from the wording in 1961 when Unitarians and Universalist merged. Then, it was the third principle and read with the preamble, “ The members of the Unitarian Universalist Association, dedicated to the principles of a free faith, unite in seeking, 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.”

This principle was a response to the Calvinist idea of election. The idea that there is a holy lottery at birth that determines whether one is worthy of salvation or not. Unitarians and Universalist knew this could not be so, not the edict of a loving God, and declared the “supreme” worth of all people.

I have been thinking a lot about our first principle, revised in 1985 to read: The inherent worth and dignity of every person. Do we really believe it? Do we believe that we and all people inherently have worth and dignity? I think this answer changes.

When we look outside of ourselves at the world, at the abuse of the rights of others, we stand clearly and quickly with our first principle. There is no confusion about this, though what is necessary to affirm those rights we do argue about.

Still, we believe that it is never right to harm another human being, to treat someone without worth, to strip people of their rights and dignity.

But when it comes to ourselves, I think we are less clear. We know that we would not tolerate someone taking our rights away. But do we know we are worthy of love, just as we are? Do you know this?

Researching the genesis of the first principle, I discovered that it was originally based on the idea that we are all created in God's image and because of this likeness to God, our worth and dignity was unquestionable.

The principle now is detached from this original concept, as I believe it should be, but have we successfully detached in our beings? Do we still believe that we are worthy of love only when we are good, beautiful, kind, socially just, thriving, not needing too much...in other words, god-like?

I have been reflecting on models of god in our history and how these models reflect us back to ourselves, what we strive for, seek and desire. Dominant theological discourses reflect god as omniscient, omnipresent, all powerful. This god does not feel when we feel, does not change as we change, is not moved or horrified by life, but exists over and above us. Such a god reflects back to us power as the ability to not be affected by others.

This is the god we have built an empire upon. To become god-like has always been a strong human motivator. But whose god do we seek to become and for what purposes and with which consequences?

As Sandra B. Lubarsky, author of “Reconstructioning Divine Power: Holocaust Jewish Theology, Feminism, and Process Philosophy” writes, “Even in a largely secular culture, images of God, whether accepted as literal or literary, give support to deep-seated messianic hopes, nationalistic desires, and interpersonal relationships.”

And I would add, to our relationship with ourselves.

This god then, seated on a throne, is not affected by others, needs nothing, no one, does not change with new information. This is a model of power that we have long lived with. When we have power, we believe we will need less, be affected by less, have to change based on the actions of others less. We are right in some ways of course but the model fails us in many other ways.

The Dalai Lama in his book, *Ethics for a New Millennium*, writes of what he has learned from having people from all over the world come to see him in his home of exile in India. So many people come hoping he will say something to reduce their suffering, to increase their capacity for happiness. This striving, writes the Dalai Lama, is what unites all

humanity. We wish to be happier; we wish to suffer less on the way. In this, we are all one.

The trouble, the Dalai Lama writes, is how we define happiness and what we believe will create it. We know this ourselves. We name possessions, more friends, money, ownership of what is beautiful, control over the lives of those we love who just can't seem to get it right, the right partner, the right job, the right body...we name all of these things as paths that might lead us to happiness.

And they don't work do they, or they don't work well. None of this relieves us of self-doubt, fear, ill health, anxiety, loneliness. The Dalai Lama writes that the poor are less anxious, even though plagued with suffering. I am not suggesting that the poor are more enlightened or better off, just that with all of our possessions, we still ache, we still question ourselves at every step, we still long for the peace of self acceptance and suffer for its lacking.

The Dalai Lama writes, "Although I never imagined that material wealth alone could ever overcome suffering, looking at the developed world from Tibet, a country always very poor, I must admit that I thought wealth would have gone further toward reducing suffering that is actually the case.

I expected that with physical hardship much reduced, as it is for the majority living in the industrially developed countries, happiness would be much easier to achieve than for those living under more severe conditions.”

He goes on to say that this is not the case. Though illness has been reduced, new illness have arisen due to anxiety and depression.

The model of god upon which we have built our ideologies lingers here still, though we have done much to dethrone it as Unitarian Universalists. Like all decorations, the title and myth are debunked long before the hold of the ideologies leave us.

We still strive to be made in the image of god and this striving keeps us away from each other, from our hearts, from our humanity.

What I am seeking is a religious language of love to share between us, that can feed us, sustain us, follow us into our dark corners and shine a light on our worth until we see it too.

I believe that deep within the theological imagination lives a cure for our malaise, our anxiety, our sense that if we are not improving our lives, growing our churches, changing the world- then we are not worthy of love.

When we take our first principle seriously, when we are able to reach into the roots of our faith, our Unitarian Universalist faith that we all deserve love and include ourselves, right where we are, right now, with all our imperfections, a freedom which only love can grant enters telling us we can risk giving of who we are, because our gifts are enough.

I gave birth to my daughter, Gina, in Frankfurt Germany. My former husband, her father, was German. I met him while apprenticing to a jeweler in Amsterdam. When my jewelry bench collapsed one day, he was the carpenter who came to fix it. I left him when my daughter was 3 months old. He had resumed a drug habit that was destroying himself and everyone around him.

I came back to this country with my dear Gina. We never received any child support or heard from Gina's father again.

We lived on welfare and housing assistance while I put myself through university and got my bachelor's degree.

I felt ashamed for a long time; I lived in a shadow. And when I started to tell the truth of my story to others, the shadow moved away. I found so many others who were living as I lived and we talked and talked. And because I had risked the story of my shame, others risked theirs and I saw their humanity and realized my own was not much different.

When we open ourselves to each other, we become lighthouses that shine and others lost on their seas of feeling not enough, find us. And together, we become a shore, a harbor, and our humanity becomes available.

And that is another promise of our faith, that our humanity is enough, is worthy of love, is connected to all life, is a source of hope.

Sharing our own humanity, we not only come to learn a great deal about others as they too share with us, we come to learn who we are. Opening our own humanity to ourselves, we realize we are not much different than the other.

Our standards of humanity become real, manageable, heart opening, possible to attain and our worth becomes visible in the context of flesh and blood, rather than a god that we can never emulate because written as impossibly distant and unneeding.

As Thich Nhat Hanh wrote in the poem from our reading, “Please call me by my true names, so I can wake up, and so the door to my heart can be left open, the door of compassion.”

This allows us to enter the world with an open heart, with a listening heart, with a heart able to learn the pathways to peace. And peace does not come easy to us, does it, not just to each of us but as we look around the world, the lack of peace is stunning.

Syria is erupting and people are questioning everything — as we should. Are we absolutely sure of the evidence? Are there no options other than military options? Can we be guaranteed that we won't face retaliation and that we won't be drawn into a protracted engagement? Will bombing ease the refugee crisis or exacerbate it?

Evidence suggests that of the 1,429 people killed through chemical warfare perpetrated by what appears to be an arm of the Syrian government on Aug. 21, over 400 were children. The use of chemical weapons has been banned internationally since after the First World War.

Should we act? If so how? And what will be the results for the civilians with one hundred thousand people dead, several million people now homeless. This is a humanitarian crisis that is approaching what we saw in the Balkans in the 1990s, in Bosnia and Kosovo.

And there is so much more: hate crimes against people who are gay, people of color, people of other religions, and ethnicities, crimes against women and children and disregard for the environment that borders on the criminal.

When we open ourselves to our own humanity, when we give of ourselves right where we are and others around open themselves, the gift is that our own humanity, our own inherent worth and dignity, can no longer be denied and from this place of wholeness, our response to the world is grounded in the knowing that there is only this moment, and this one too, and this one too, and we are good enough to be here, to be occupying this moment here, together, with no need to improve ourselves, with only the need to give of ourselves because we are sure what we have to give matters.

The only way to knowing our worth is acceptance of our own humanity. There is no other way. And the only way to accept our own humanity is by engaging in each other's humanity.

Unitarian Universalist, Dr. Sharon Welch, professor of Religion and Society at Meadville Lombard Theological School, in her essay, "Return to Laughter" writes, "We learn how to be moral not from God, not from a "being beyond being"- but from the experiences, teaching, and guidance conveyed to us by other human beings."

When we allow ourselves to be known, when we open our very humanity to each other, we learn that we are not alone, we are just like each other in our longings and fears and then we experience the deep goodness inherent in those who share their lives with us.

We experience this over and over again and as we do, we come to imagine, to build the muscle of religious imagination, that tells we are not so unlike each other and that we are the world are worthy of life, of peace, of hope.

Our humanity so exposed leads us to the human heart we share and we can return again and again to be refreshed, to receive the communion of our shared fragility and our shared longing, our shared sorrow and our shared joy.

Sharon Welch again, "I write as one of the masses immersed fully in wonder, pain, joy, fears, and hopes of the everyday. I am an atheist. I do not desire God. I do not desire to

become divine but rather to be human, “spirit and dust” and my prayers are venues opening me to our embeddness in nature, in history, with all their promise and peril.

The horizon of being is not “becoming divine” but being vibrantly imperfect, attuned to shifting forms of reciprocity between us and all our relations.”

Our first principle comes from the Judeo-Christian precept that we are all made equally in the image of God. I suggest that we take this concept and change it to: We are all made equally in the image of each other. And this is a great gift, one that will open our hearts again and again and refresh us with the simple waters of flesh and bone, presence and time, life and life again showing us that we are here because we are supposed to be here and our love of each other and ourselves is a strong enough balm to make it all worth while.

Amen.