

Our First Principle
A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson
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UCV

Nearly every day, I walk past the black monolith standing at the corner of 49th and Oak that announces the name of our congregation along with the upcoming Sunday worship service. Lately, we added the motto: “Diverse Beliefs, Shared Values.” I’m going to be talking about the “shared values” part; in particular, the value we share that we call our First Principle—which states: “we covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” I want us to think about and feel those words: “*the inherent worth and dignity of every person*”—how they came to stand at the head of our Seven Unitarian Universalist values, or principles, and what they may mean for us and the lives we live.

Due to the fact that we have no one singular, authoritative source that speaks definitively on our behalf—be it scripture, or creed, prophet or Pope; and due to the reality that those in this liberal faith tradition, now and in the past, are acutely attuned to the wisdom and folly of cultures, the findings of sciences, the discernment of reason, direct spiritual experiences, the teeming web of life and the ever shifting tides, currents, tumults and wonders of history—Unitarians are challenged and blessed to be an ever-seeking people; seeking how to define who we are, what we believe and how we are to act in the journey of our lives. I see this work of self-definition happening over and over in our nearly five hundred-year history. It may be a pain to not have a once-for-all creed, scripture or supreme leader, but I think we can agree we wouldn’t have it any other way—better the ragged glory of our messy freedom than the yoke of authority demanding belief and bended knee.

Acts of self-definition in our faith tradition arise in response to two situations: first, is the need to come out of the closet and state basically to the world who we are and what we hold to

be most true of ourselves, and second, it happens in order to clear up confusion or turmoil within our ranks, between ourselves, our congregations and our denomination. In the first instance, typically, and for the sake of claiming our own identity before the world, we step out on to the public stage in order to confront those who, from outside, sometimes maliciously mischaracterized us; in the second, the work is to bring about internal clarity, hold disparate factions together and amicably hammer out a consensus group portrait—never an easy task for an independently minded people like us and our ancestors.

These efforts go back to the late 1500s which saw the publication of a *Catechism* for Unitarian congregations in Poland and continue right up to the present with the Vision Statement and Five Aspirations of the Canadian Unitarian Council in 2016. Some definitions are pithy and easily memorized like James Freeman Clarke’s “Five Points of the Theology of the Future,” some are powerful homilies—William Ellery Channing’s famous 1819 Baltimore sermon comes to mind, while others are hefty book-length tomes like the 1936 *Unitarians Face a New Age*.

Prime examples of the second sort of claiming our identity—that is, the work of dispelling confusion within our movement and creating a consensus group portrait—are the original Six Principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association, as approved when the Unitarian and Universalist denominations consolidated in 1961, and the Seven UU Principles as adopted by the UUA in 1985 that we’re most familiar with—they’re the ones printed on those bookmarks in our pews. Listen closely as I read portions of the 1961 Six Principles and let’s try to picture them in our minds. So here they are:

- 1. To strengthen one another in a...search for truth as the foundation of our religious fellowship;*
- 2. To cherish and spread the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition...summarized in the Judeo-Christian heritage as love to God and love to man;*
- 3. 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;*

4. *To...striv[e] for a world community founded on ideals of brotherhood, justice and peace;*
5. *To serve the needs of member churches and fellowships...to extend and strengthen liberal religion;*
6. *To encourage cooperation with men of good will in every land.*

Now, do we see ourselves described there? Anything missing or amiss? (e.g. women, children, nature/interdependent web, “love to God”) If so, we’re in good company. Within a decade of the adoption of these Six Principles, UU women began to organize and agitate for change, convinced, and with good cause, that the original UUA Principles with all the references to “man,” “men,” “fellowships” and “brotherhood” failed to affirm them and that the Principles also failed to indicate a respect for the wholeness of life and for the earth. What ensued was an enormously well-organized, grass roots process of revision that resulted in rewording the Principles and adding the Six Sources of our living tradition in 1984 and 5. For thirty-five years, they have served us well; though now, work is afoot in the States and Canada to explore whether to add an eighth principle dedicated to the work of dismantling racism and other oppressions in ourselves and in our institutions.

Let’s return to the two UU statements of 1961 and 1984. The third principle in the 1961 text reads: *To affirm, defend and promote the supreme worth of every human personality [and] the dignity of man.* The 1984 statement revised and moved this principle to the top of the list of our current Seven Principles which reads: *to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.* This is what I want us to focus on for the rest of this sermon: “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” Before 1961, I couldn’t find these words, this formula in any previous set of Unitarian and Universalist definitions and principles going all the way back to the 1500s. In the 1961, for the first time, we wrote in our Principles: “the supreme worth and

dignity,” and in 1984 “the inherent worth and dignity.” Where did this come from and why? And what do we mean when we say that our worth and dignity is inherent?

First, it seems quite clear that from the late 1800s to the mid 20th century, a slow, cumulative shift in our worldview, from Unitarian laity to ministers, took place removing the primacy of a belief in God—however defined—and replacing *that* with an experiential commitment to a rich and deep religious naturalism; a naturalism that situated human flourishing and reverence for the world and its teeming web of life as the twin pillars of what we believe and covenant to affirm and promote. Second, after adopting the 1961 Six Principles, UU women called out the sexist assumptions and language embedded in our historical language and institutions, and they rightly demanded that we dismantle it root and branch. (Has that work been achieved?) And third, and most important frankly, *the 20th century happened to all us around the world*: an unprecedented assault on human rights, human dignity and worth took place—total war, collectivization, alienated industrial labour, mass consumer capitalism, and genocide.

And here I want to talk about what appears to me as the clear influence of the language of the preamble of the 1945 UN Charter and that of the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 on what became our first Principle—the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Let’s look at the 1945 UN Charter Preamble. It starts out like this : “*We the people of the United Nations determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and to regain faith in fundamental human rights, **in the dignity and worth of the human person**, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small...:etc.* Here for the first time, on the public stage, with the

force of an international treaty, we find this forthright, foundational assertion: “the dignity and worth of the human person.”

There’s an interesting backstory here. The Commission tasked with writing the preamble of the United Nations was comprised of various delegates drawn from the fifty-one nations constituting the original, core membership of the UN. The South African delegate, Prime Minister Jan Smuts, submitted a first, formidable preamble draft.

Let’s focus on one line. The draft reads: “to re-establish faith in fundamental human rights, the sanctity and ultimate value of the human personality, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small.” Then, the American delegate—Virginia Gildersleeve, who was Dean of Barnard College in New York City, Professor of English, sole woman on the Commission, and not-so-closeted lesbian—in pencil, crossed out the line which read: “the sanctity and ultimate value of human personality” and wrote, in the adjoining column: “the dignity and value of every human being.” That’s almost word-for-word what ended up being adopted in the official Preamble.

Alert to words like “sanctity,” “ultimacy” and “personality” in the first draft which echoed mid-20th century Catholic theology—something that wouldn’t fly with delegates from many non-Christian nations—and perhaps, though I speculate, wouldn’t fly with a lesbian academic whose sexual identity was absolutely beyond the pale in Christian moral teaching—Ms Gildersleeve, with a few words written in pencil, crafted an amendment for the ages. It’s not often that historians get to see a smoking gun and witness the consequential contingencies of history. But there it is.

From the UN Charter, this formula: “dignity and value of every human being” made its way directly into the UN’s first Human Rights Commission and their writing of the Preamble of

the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (Key members of the Commission hailed from Lebanon, China, France, India, Canada and the US. The substance of the Declaration drew directly from the formidable constitutional scholarship of Canadian jurist John Peters Humphrey.) Commission members added one fateful word: “inherent.” Here are some lines from the 1948 Preamble: *Whereas recognition of the **inherent** dignity....of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world, and Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, [and] in the dignity and worth of the human person...*” etc.

Beginning in the 1940s, these words and terms: “inherent dignity...the dignity and worth of the human person,” radiated out, made their way into and became part of our cultural and legal vocabulary. They were embedded in the influential work of psychologist Rollo May where, in 1953, he wrote: “joy, rather than happiness is the goal of life...and is based on the experience of one’s identity as being of worth and dignity.” Martin Luther King Jr. preached: “I want to suggest some of the things that should begin your life’s blueprint. Number one...should be a deep belief in your own dignity.....Every human being is an heir to a legacy of dignity and worth.” Jeremy Waldron, the legal scholar and historian, writes that “the modern notion of human dignity involves an upwards equalization of rank...a leveling up, by an extension of formerly high-status treatment to all sectors of the population....The thing to do with something of [worth] is promote and protect it...to treasure it. The thing to do with a...status of dignity is to respect and defer to the person who bears it.” And Caleb Foote, preaching to the Main Line Unitarian Church in Devon, Pennsylvania, in March 1960, said: “our moral religious concern is for the inherent worth and dignity of every individual.”

I can't prove it (I'd have to go to the UUA archives in Boston), but I think it's clear nonetheless: the preambles to the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights directly influenced those Unitarians and Universalists in 1961 and 1984 who wrote our founding, enduring First Principle. I'm not embarrassed by that direct borrowing. "Our living tradition... draws from many sources," we say, including "words...of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love."

And speaking of prophetic people, 2500 years ago, it was Isaiah who said: what does God want: "to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke...to share your bread with the hungry...to take the wretched poor into your home; when you see the naked, clothe them, and ignore not your own kin." These words are still startling. They emphasize the essential worth of those who find themselves marginalized in our economies and society, and in so doing, prophetic women and men dramatically emphasize a moral stance, a way of being for others—their bodies, their lives and their aspirations—not of mere forbearance, but of respect for something *sacred* in every person no matter whatever their story and circumstance.

And here, let's think about the word "inherent" when we say in our First Principle, "we covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person." What does it mean for worth and dignity to be "inherent?" To inhere is to exist essentially and permanently in something. Something that's inherent—like a characteristic, attribute or right—is possessed essentially and fundamentally; it belongs, it's vested, it's inviolable. It can't be taken away or abridged. It's not dependent on recognition by others; no outside authority or social contract can deny or hedge it. It's something that can't be strived for or achieved.

Speaking of human beings, it can't be erased by misdeeds, victimization, self-hatred or self-harm. It's an indestructible, basic human truth. Inherent human worth and dignity cannot be based on the exercise of certain capacities; it does not depend on some stage of mental, physical or moral development, or accident of birth. Whether you're a newborn or an elder, heretic or villain, whether struggling with emotional distress, whether you're rich or poor—it does not matter. To inhere means it is given; worth and dignity belongs to us essentially and beyond all difference.

To assert the inherent worth and dignity of every person is radical; it is prophetic. No so-called science, no religion, no political theory or system can deny, compromise or take it away—no matter what. And I dare say that so much of the violence and discontent that afflicts us arises from the tragedy of humiliation—that is, when people know, experience and feel acutely that the inherent worth and dignity of their personhood has been violated—whether by casual, ad hoc unthinking behaviour of others or by systemic assault by “powers and structures of [oppression].”

And here's the thing: the sheer givenness of our inherent worth and dignity implies that there is a human nature that transcends all difference of biology, culture and history. Something like that is independent of the shifting tides of fashion and opinion, of space and time. The word we use to describe *that kind of independence*, the kind that's not the plaything of history, of creeds, consumption, profits, culture and status?—we call that *transcendence*; “that transcending mystery and wonder that moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold all life.”

Our inherent worth and dignity is rooted in an order of reality, a realm of meaning that is mysteriously absolute, unconditional and radically free. Only that allows us, gives us the

grounds, rationally and emotionally, to recognize and grant inherent human worth and dignity the status of truth, the kind of truth which stands as the First Principle of our religious tradition.

It took us a long time to get here. We had to wrestle with creeds and calumny; with the cultural baggage of supernatural beings and the dead weight of holy writ; we had to pass through the twilight of the gods and the chastening fires of world calamities, to own up to the grip of patriarchy and oppression in ourselves and institutions, and to our reckless assault on the teeming web of life. And in the end, we borrowed from the prophetic words of the founding documents of the United Nations and made them our own—something I don't regret for a minute.

In closing, may we take these radical words: our covenant "*to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person*"—and make them a living reality. Our world desperately needs a people who will courageously embody these words and make them real. And may it be so. And may they be us. Amen.

(see Warren R. Ross, "Shared Values: How the UUA's Principles and Purposes were shaped..." *UU World*, November/December 2000 and 5/1/2006; Samuel Moyn, "Why is dignity in the Charter of the United Nations?" *humanityjournal.org*, June 10, 2014; Jeremy Waldron, *Dignity, Rank, and Rights*, The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, April 21-23, 2009; Mary Ann Glendon and Seth D. Kaplan, "Renewing Human Rights," *First Things*, February 2019; Kenneth Hughes, "Understanding the Principle of Inherent Human Dignity," International Seminar on "The Solidarity of the Shaken," the Václav Havel Library and the Center for Phenomenological Studies, May 2013.)