

"The INHERENT WORTH and DIGNITY of EVERY PERSON"

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In 1961 when the Unitarian Universalist Association was formed these words were adopted as one of the purposes of the Association:

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.

The “supreme worth” part came from a Universalist statement adopted in 1935. The “dignity” part I suspect was inserted by the Unitarians. In 1984 the principle was shortened to read:

[we] covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person;

The early Universalists in the 1700s believed that God would save everyone and that there was no alternative afterlife in a Hell. Logically, if God found “worth” in every person so should we. The opposite of “worth” then is something like hopeless. Original Sin was a hopeless doctrine, every other Christian religion believed then and it is still in the creeds and confessions.

But dignity has a wider use. It is in the Preamble and again in Article One of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the base line standard around the world. The opposite of the word “dignity” is something like humiliation. For example, when you conquer a people you should treat them with respect, not enslave them or bulldoze their houses and humiliate them as they try to go about their day-to-day lives. After WWI we humiliated the German nation and we got a Hitler to deal with a decade or so later. So when you negotiate with a weaker party it is wise to give them an out to save their dignity. Give them a chance to recover their lives again.

The big question we have to face in the twenty-first century is simple, do we really feel this principle is viable today? The history of the last century alone is so pervasively contrary, to what extent can we give more than lip service to this principle, “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” We have here a radical principle of recent origin, the western enlightenment,

post renaissance, post reformation, post Locke and Newton and Kant, “inherent worth and dignity.”

This first principle is as radical as the words of Jesus, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Your love stretches beyond your own tribe to embrace everyone. How widespread is this principle two thousand years later? How much more frail is an “inherent worth and dignity.” What if others speak a different language, practice a different religion, and are dirt poor. Don’t the poor deserve to be poor? It is commonly believed in our society that the rich deserve to be rich, after-all they earned it. And the poor deserve to be poor; somehow they missed the boat, turned lazy, need to work harder. If you coddle them they will never get up on their hind legs and work.

This congrary belief, I suspect goes back almost as far as our “worth and dignity” principle to colonial times when Europe was carving out vast territories of colonial exploitation. Thomas Malthus wrote a “scientific” paper claiming that populations outgrow resources for food and support. Therefore some should grab all they can to improve their chances for survival and prosperity.

Then along came Charles Darwin with the new rules of biological evolution. Natural selection. Species adapt for their maximum advantage. Not long after Darwin, Herbert Spencer and others invented “social Darwinism,” the idea that in human society there would be “survival of the fittest.” Thus the rich and powerful were doing something good and the poor and exploited were losing out in the survival stakes, and that was natural and right. Quickly the machinations of colonialism felt vindicated. And the lords of industry and finance felt their “devil take the hindmost” attitudes were socially redeemable. Social Darwinism of course is not supported by the principles of evolution in biology. Darwin did not support it nor has the subsequent development of the biological sciences. But it is as powerful today as it ever was, endorsed by over half our politicians and by widespread attitudes and assumptions in the general population.

When you add in issues around immigration, issues of living on debt, look at the behavior of bankers who would rather play the lotteries of finance than invest in manufacturing and weak and vulnerable start up entrepreneurs, and add to the bankers, criminals out there, the largest prison population in the world, well there is plenty of evidence to work with if you want to believe

that the rich versus the rest of us are engaged in a war of “the fittest” and deserve their fates. Some, it is assumed, have a good deal more “worth” than others. And dignity, where is that human dignity in a dog eat dog world?

We get a steady barrage of bad news: global warming, democratic institutions that no longer work, students outed on the internet who commit suicide, domestic violence increasing in an economic recession, the mortgage or death-gage crisis, torture in our so-called terrorist prisons, rapes, murders, elections where people vote against their own interests. So how fares that enlightenment, “inherent worth and dignity of every person?” Can we honestly say, among us here, this first principle travels in our hearts, day by day, hour by hour?

Let’s look at that original sin idea again, that hopeless doctrine, so pervasively believed, even now. There is a family story of my wife, Eleanor, and her mother, Cathy, when Eleanor was an infant. There was a party and in came Cathy with Eleanor in her arms. The discussion with “Uncle Warren” was on original sin. He was an Episcopalian and Cathy a Unitarian (actually then a member of this church). Cathy held baby Eleanor up and asked, how can you call this innocent child sinful? Whereupon on cue Eleanor began to cry uncontrollably, kick her little legs, and force a quick retreat for her mother and of course her argument.

But that is not original sin is it? That is nature. Not nature red in tooth and claw either. But rather nature hungry or uncomfortable. “A fierce unrest seethes at the core of all existing things,” as our hymn asserts. It is not good or bad, even the infant longs for better times, better circumstances, a better life. Dare we say it longs for love, for good relationships, for a good society? Let us look at what biological evolution really says about human history.

We are social animals. Like wolves, elephants, monkeys and chimpanzees we thrive in social groups, we are raised in families, are part of a local tribe or community, are from infancy in covenant with others. We are not dropped at birth out somewhere to fend for ourselves. We gain our very identity from our relationships, from our commitments, from the input we receive from friends near at hand or society and the larger world that informs and sustains us. The idea that the world is against us, that we are in a live or die competition with others from an early age, is simply false.

Lets say for a minute that it could be that way, that humans are meant to be at war with everyone else, sort of like the so-called “reality shows” on TV. Lets say one of our main purposes in life is to vote someone out of the family each week. Put yourself back in history a million years or so, out on the savannahs of Africa, in the tall grass in the land of zebras, hyenas and lions. Who is going to survive very long in that environment who is not cooperative, who wanders off alone, who does not come to the aid of others when needed. We are here because, generation after generation, over countless generations, we did have consideration for our neighbors. We did not even have to think about our neighbors, we were a part of them and they were a part of us. To wander off by yourself, even to pitch your tent out of hearing of your group meant almost certain death. We survived in our evolution through cooperation and not through selfishness and so-called self interest. In fact every now and then there was an individual who was not generous and cooperative, an aberrant person, who hoarded more than their share, and their fate was isolation, and an early demise. The self-centered did not survive.

So babies cry because in the wisdom of our biology it is a forgone conclusion that their needs will be cared for. Otherwise in the long grass the sound would bring the lion. It is very recently, the last three thousand years or so that the individual person emerged as a separate, independent, entity apart from the social context. “The inherent worth and dignity of every person.” This is an extremely young concept. For the Greeks and Romans the word person or persona meant one who played a certain role in society with rights appropriate to that role. You put on a mask. That was your life! The idea in the English language that a person is an individual, that you could, in yourself, be a self-governing individual, came into usage in the seventeenth century!

That was about the time the Pilgrims landed in Plymouth. Yes, indeed that entire community huddled together in a single house, about a hundred of them, for the better part of a year. Then they built a group of little houses clustered close together in a village. It was a long time before any Pilgrim walked off into the woods and built a cabin in splendid isolation. It was not safe in the early years. But more importantly it did not occur to anyone to do so. To be a Pilgrim meant to work together, to cooperate with each other, to covenant together in a Mayflower compact, to hunt and plant and eat and

pray together in community. The so-called rugged individual is a recent invention, the word “individual” was not even in the dictionary.

It was a vast social distance, a very recent aberration, to move from an intimate community to a world of social-Darwinism, a world where everyone looks out for themselves, in sickness and in health, you are on your own, and the devil take the hindmost. That the poor and those without access to health care somehow deserve their fate. That the rich and comfortable somehow alone are deserving, entitled. Indeed, is our song, “we are a gentle and loving people,” obsolete?

We can now grasp how radical a statement we affirm, “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” In a few brief centuries we have come to affirm each single person, their worth, their dignity. We see the newest problem acted out each week in a British Comedy. The socially conforming, but delicate dignity, of Hyacinth Bucket, keeping up her appearances sending friends and family to distraction. We see her neighbor, Emmett, sitting at his piano saying to his sister, “Oh, she’s only human!” with a close up shot of his face as it gradually turns from neutral to sour. Implied in “she’s only human,” original sin, depravity, something out of “nature tooth and claw,” looking out for herself, selfish, self-centered. Of course, “she’s only human.”

The scene shifts to the Vicar at the local Anglican parish. He is rehearsing his Sunday sermon which will be “Love Thy Neighbor.” He is seen asking, “Who is my neighbor?” He decides it has to be everyone without exception. Then his wife comes in the room and informs him: “The Bucket woman is coming.” Immediately he is drained of all charitable thoughts and decides to change his sermon topic to, “Turning Water Into Wine.” Or in other words, Love thy Neighbor has its limits. Some people are beyond the pale! How would each of us respond to Hyacinth Bucket? She would test the mettle of any congregation!

But she is also a stereotype. She may be socially conforming, but she is also an aberration. Not so long ago she would have been encouraged to take a walk into the long grass, to feed the lions. We don’t treat each other like this. It is NOT “only human.” It is far, far distant from the baby’s cry to anything like Hyacinth Bucket. She is among the walking wounded. Something went wrong along the way. And it is not that unusual now to find people incapable of loving their neighbors as themselves. Really unable to

be persons, to be individuals, to evolve beyond persona to person. She wears a mask, it enslaves her, she can gain no perspective on herself. And all her neighbors suffer, and her family, and her husband. She even believes the prime minister and the domestic secretary exist for the purpose of responding to her whims of the moment. The greater needs of church and community, and country and the planet are wholly beyond her awareness.

And thus she is pathetic, wounded, and very funny. Why is it comedy? She is larger than life, standing in for so many who are in part that way, at least some of the time. It is funny because there are so many around us who didn't get the whole message, who missed community on the one hand and missed "person," individual, on the other hand. It seems to me the words of Jesus are only repeating what our species, in its long evolutionary journey, has always known, known in our bones. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Without it we would not have survived over the last million years. It is self evident, we are born knowing this. We live and breathe as social animals finding our identity through our relationships. When we emerge as individuals it is because we have found support, sustenance, empowerment from others along the way. Even today when we live in houses and not nests in the tall savannah grass.

Yes, it is radical that we affirm the "inherent worth and dignity of every person." Many have been wounded in the journey. Some have been more fortunate. The outcome of this human emergence is not even assured. But as social beings attuned to life together with others we are capable of compassion. We can compensate and approach each other with hands and hearts for healing. It is in our bones, it informs our humanity. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

