

When you see a worthy person, endeavor to emulate him.
When you see an unworthy person, then examine your inner
self. --- Confucius

Oberlin Unitarian Universalist Fellowship



Inherent or Bestowed? The worth and dignity of human beings

Sunday, October 3, 2010

Service offered by
Cindy and Andy Frantz

ORDER OF SERVICE

Prelude *Little Fugue* (J.S. Bach)

Welcome and Announcements

Sounding the Bell

Chalice Lighting # 448 (read together)

We gather this hour as people of faith
With joys and sorrows, gifts and needs
We light this beacon of hope, sigh of our quest
For truth and meaning, in celebration
Of the life we share together.

Opening Song Meditation on Breathing

Story for All Ages *Pinky and Rex and the Mean Old Witch* by James Howe & Melissa Sweete

Singing out the children

“Go now in peace, stay if you please, may the spirit of love surround you everywhere, everywhere you may go.”

Our Seven Principles (read together)

Sharing of Joys and Concerns

Sharing Our Offering “Praise Song” (Hal Walker)

Responsive Reading #659 “For You” (Walt Whitman)

Homily Inherent or Bestowed? The worth and dignity of human beings -- Cindy Frantz

Closing Hymn #1008 “When our Heart is in a Holy Place”

Benediction (#498, words by Howard Thurman)

Extinguishing the Chalice (read together)

We extinguish this flame, but the light of our hope continues to illuminate the world. Together may we walk the path of justice, speak words of love, live the selfless deed, tread gently upon the earth, and fill the world with compassion. Until we meet again, blessed be.

Postlude “Love is the 7th Wave” (Sting)



IF YOU'RE VISITING THIS MORNING . . .

About Unitarian Universalism: Contemporary Unitarian Universalism draws from its Protestant roots for the style of our Sunday morning services, but Unitarian Universalists have always valued the insights from other religious traditions.

About the Fellowship: In the mid 1950's a group of college students formed a Unitarian Fellowship with Professor Warren Taylor as their advisor. The Oberlin Unitarian Fellowship (OUUF) was recognized by the national association on May 25, 1960, becoming the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship upon the merger of the two national organizations in 1961. OUUF has held liberal religious services in their present location at the Oberlin Early Childhood Center since 2002.

Inherent or Bestowed? The Worth and Dignity of Human Beings

The first principle of Unitarian Universalism is perhaps the only one that involves any kind of faith. The 7th principle – the interconnected web -- is a physical fact, and we ignore it at our peril. Principles 2 – 6 are about process, such as the right of conscience and democracy. But the first principle makes an assertion: every person has inherent worth and dignity.

UU's aren't so big on taking things on faith. Luckily, if you read the fine print at the front of the hymnal, we aren't required to say we believe it. We just need to affirm and promote it; act like people have inherent worth and dignity, even if you don't really believe it's true. It turns out this might not be such a bad strategy, as we'll talk about later.

But pause and think: What does it mean to say someone has inherent worth and dignity? According to dictionary.com, inherent means something exists in someone as a permanent and inseparable element, quality, or attribute. This suggests that we're born with worth and dignity, and it's there all the time, no matter what.

There no matter what. Do you believe that? Reflect silently for a moment.

It is easy to believe when we look at a young child. I believe it most of the time when I look at my family, and friends.

But what about people who have done terrible things? What about Jim Jones, who led his followers to death in the jungles of Guyana? Osama bin Laden, who has directed multiple mass-casualty attacks, including those on 9/11? What about the US soldiers at Abu Ghraib, who tortured Iraqi detainees?

It was grappling with the horrific reality of torture that led Bill Shultz, former Executive Director of Amnesty International and former president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, to conclude that in fact worth and dignity are not inherent, but bestowed.

He said, "...inherency is a political construct — perhaps a very useful myth but a myth nonetheless — designed to cover up the fact that we are all sinners and that we are not always certain which sins (and hence which sinners) are worse than others. Each of us has to be assigned worth...and taught to behave with dignity..."

Each of us has to be assigned worth, and taught to behave with dignity.

Psychologists would largely agree, and be quick to point out that the assignation process can often go awry. It is clear from decades of observation and research that humans are profoundly influenced by the social interactions that surround them from birth until death. We need people to care for us and value us, and if we are deprived of this fundamental need, we suffer.

But those who are not assigned worth by the people around them do not just suffer silently inside. They embody this lack of worth; either through self-destructive behavior, such as drug addiction or the unbridled pursuit of material goods; or through destructive behavior directed at others, such as physical or psychological aggression. Ironically, the fact that someone failed to bestow worth upon them earlier in their life makes it harder for people later in life to bestow worth. And the cynical among us begin to question the truth of our First Principle.

Similarly, those who are not taught dignity have a difficult time learning it later on. From the earliest age, humans have strong impulses both to harm others, and to love and nurture others. We are taught what is appropriate behavior, and if we live in a world

that denies our worth, we will not learn how to respond with dignity.

But just as withholding worth and dignity creates a lasting wound, bestowing it has strong redemptive power. A famous psychology study done in the 1960's illustrated this point clearly. Teachers were told at the beginning of the school year that diagnostic tests showed that some of their children would be "bloomers," and excel that year, while others would not. In fact the information they received about each child was randomly determined. But at the end of the year, those identified as bloomers did in fact bloom. Their IQ and test scores increased, relative to their "average" peers.

The effect has not just been shown in academic settings. It has been demonstrated with social skills, leadership skills and physical skills. Believe in someone, and you increase the chance that they will succeed. If we take the fateful loving step of giving someone worth, we have created more aptitude, more skill, more success. We have literally made the world a better place. Let us then aspire to give the gift that Walt Whitman gives in his poem:

"The sum of all known reverence I add up in you, whoever you are."

This is the Unitarian Universalist charge.

More easily said than done. It is often quite hard to honor people's inherent worth and dignity, particularly when they are not acting from a place of dignity.

Yet if in fact worth is not inherent, but must be bestowed, and if in fact bestowing this worth is more often than not redemptive and healing, then we must rise to the occasion. We must respond to the people they could be, not the people they are. We must

respond as if someone has inherent worth and dignity, despite all evidence to the contrary.

This is hard in the face of evil; it is hard to look at a murderer or torturer and see the potential of worth and dignity that exists behind their actions. Fortunately, most of us will never face that situation. But every day we are confronted with minor villains – people who are inconsiderate or irrational. People who seem to willfully misunderstand us, or to pursue blatant self interest at the expense of others.

I invite you now to think of someone in your daily life who presents a challenge to your efforts to live in to the first principle. Someone who elicits frustration and contempt. I know you can do it; we've all got at least one of these people in our lives. Let's pause now, to hold that person in your mind.

These people are not evil; you may be able to identify many admirable qualities that this person possesses; you may feel deep love and affection at times. But there are times when you're just not feeling that "inherent worth and dignity thing" with them. Their viewpoint is invalid, their goals ignoble. They lack skill and perspective. They are misguided and self-absorbed. Frankly, they're just not as good as you. It's a shame, but there it is.

It is a shame. Because our Unitarian Universalist convictions demand better of us. The first principle challenges us to add up the sum of all known reverence in the people we meet, whoever they are. No exceptions. And if we can bestow this gift with an open heart, we may help these individuals bloom into their potential.

But before we begin to doubt our own worth and dignity, let me provide some perspective on why we find this so difficult. If it were easy to always focus on the good – or potential good – in people, we would not need the 1st principle. It is in fact

universally difficult, and thus the source of the difficulty must lie deep in our psychological make-up.

Humans have two major orientations they can take to the world. One is focused on self-preservation, and is termed by psychologists the “ego-system.” It is run by our stress hormones, like cortisol, and is designed to get us out of emergency situations. Elements of this system can be found in the most basic of life forms, all the way up to us – the impulse to escape harm. It resides in our ancient, reptilian brain. It is swift and powerful.

Mammals developed another approach to the world, however – one that enables them to care for their young. It is described by psychologists as a species-preservation system, and is regulated by the attachment hormones, such as oxytocin. It is called the “eco-system,” because one’s attention is focused outward, on the well-being of others, rather than inward on preserving the self.

These two systems, common to all mammals, play out differently in humans than in other animals. Eons ago, the ego-system mainly served to protect our ancestors from predators and natural disasters. But modern homo sapiens are unique in being as invested in their social identity as they are in their physical survival – sometimes they are more invested in their social identity than in physical survival, as suicide bombers illustrate. Physiologically, the same system that helped our ancestors run from predators is also triggered when we feel a social threat. Increased heart rate. Narrowing of attention. A focus on information relevant only to our own well-being. We may be merely sitting across the table from a frustrating colleague, but our body is saying, “eek! A Bear!”

At the same time, we also have a unique ability to generalize our care for others – not just to our offspring or members of our social group. We have the ability to care for strangers on the other side of the world that we will never meet, and for other animals, for

the biosphere. When we orient this way to the world, our body is flooded with a love cocktail – hormones and neurotransmitters that are associated with feelings of peace, well-being, greater success, and longevity.

How do you know which system you are primarily operating from at any given time? The ego-system, or the eco-system? It can be tricky. You can do someone a favor or donate money to a cause because you genuinely want to help, but you can also do it to make yourself look good or to get something in return. Ask yourself, is my main goal right now to prove my own worth, or to enhance someone else’s? That is the key question. Is your heart in a holy place, or is it standing guard with fists raised?

Let us return now to those challenging individuals, the people who we find hard to honor. So often, our feelings of contempt for others are driven by a fear for ourselves. The people that frustrate us are not honoring our inherent worth and dignity. They threaten something that feels central to our survival – either physical or social. We act to preserve our own worth and dignity, often at their expense.

What if instead we trust that our social and physical selves will survive, and turn our attention instead to the people around us? What if we remain secure in our own worth long enough to bestow it on another? This is our charge. To live into our first principle, we must rein in the ego-system, and shore up the eco-system. We must bring our heart into a holy place.

Did I mention already that this is easier said than done? Before sending us all off to tackle this daunting task, let me offer two strategies we can use to help us in our quest.

First, it is easier done together than alone. The Unitarian Universalist minister Fred Hammond wrote,

“Our Inherent worth and dignity comes to fruition through authentic relationships with one another. This is why coming together in community is so vitally important. We have an opportunity to be redemptive for one another. It is a wonderful gift that we can offer others.”

As you leave today, take the opportunity to bestow the gift of worth to someone here, knowing that when we have been affirmed in our faith communities, it is easier to go into the world and face the arrows that others sling at us without defensiveness.

Second, as Buddhist and yogic traditions discovered years ago, breathing is an excellent way to transition from the ego-system to the eco-system. Mindful breathing lowers cortisol and the other physiological drivers of our reptilian brain, and allows the mammalian brain to dominate.

Take a moment now to breathe in, and breathe out. At first, breathe gently, like you are lightly kissing a sleeping child. [pause] Now slowly breathe more deeply, strong and bold breaths to sustain your strong and bold self. When you breathe in this manner, you breathe in peace, literally. When you breathe out, choose to breathe out love. Breathe in the peace that comes from this supportive faith community, breathe out love to those around you.