



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

How Inherent is Worth?

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Speaker

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We Unitarian Universalists don't have a creed that we all have to believe. But we have seven principles. The first of these is: "We covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. "Inherent" worth, meaning permanent and inborn.

I've been profoundly puzzled by our first principle ever since I first saw it. I came to the Oakland UU church 22 years ago not knowing much about Unitarian Universalism, and I was greeted our first principle in the form of a banner that said, "All are worthy; all are welcome." I imagine that this struck me the same way it would strike many of you. For a few warm instants I felt like people in this church thought that I was inherently worthy of respect. I, for myself, was truly welcome. But I was just out of an abusive relationship where my partner was life-threatening to our baby and cruel to me. So it took just a few minutes for me to start thinking, "So this church thinks he is worthy? If he is welcome, I need to leave." But I stayed. For months there was something similar that was really bothering me. A little girl named Polly Klaas had just been kidnapped from her bed at night by a stranger, raped and murdered. Her killer had been found. So these people thought that he was worthy? He was welcome here? Didn't behavior matter at all in judging worth? And what are all these people worthy of anyway?

Many years later, and after a lot of research, I found out where our first principle came from, and what that word "worth" in it meant when the principle was written. Our first principle was added to the Unitarian principles in the early 1960s when the Universalist Church joined with the Unitarian. The Universalists were known for believing in universal salvation. They believed that God was too kind and loving to condemn anyone to hell. So they believed all of us to be worthy in the eyes of God. What we were worthy of was salvation, and their proof of our worth came from their view of the nature of God.

But how do the Universalists think about people like the murderer I just mentioned, or leaders of genocide, or torturers? Well, for a long time the Universalists' belief was that these people went to hell, where they paid for their sins, and then they were admitted to heaven. So everyone was saved; for some it just took a while. Then along came Hosea Ballou in the late 1700's, early 1800's. Ballou was a Universalist preacher, and later a minister. From his reading of the bible he concluded that we all pay for our sins in this life, then we all go to heaven when we die. And that became the mainstream Universalist belief.

But this argument that we all have saving worth because of the kind, loving nature of God isn't a convincing or relevant argument for many of us. Even those of us who are Jews or Christians or Muslims and believe in a personal god might differ with the Universalists about the nature of God. Consider the book of Job, a fundamental story for all three religions. Job was a righteous, devout man. According to the story, Satan made a wager with God, betting that he could separate Job from God, and as a result he was allowed to visit upon Job every kind of pain and misery—disease, the death of his all of his children, his family, and even his animals. At the end of the story God comes in a whirlwind, and you think that an explanation will be

forthcoming. But instead he berates Job for declaring himself innocent to his friends and for questioning, and he makes a long speech about how mighty he is. That doesn't sound like a kind and loving God to me. Maybe the Universalists are wrong. At the very least, intelligent people can differ on this.

And, of course, there is the question of whether there actually is a god anything like that of the Universalists. We have a diversity of beliefs here. I am an agnostic. I don't know whether there is a God. My husband is an atheist. He knows there is no God. And we have Buddhists, pagans, Hindus and people who believe in different forms of spirit. If you don't believe in the God of the Universalists or something similar, then deriving worth from the character of God doesn't mean anything to you.

And that is a problem. There are big stakes here. You don't just encounter the term "inherent worth" in our principles. If you go to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, or other human rights or animal rights documents you will find that those rights are based on the universal equal inherent worth of all people. And as pointed out in the reading from Michael Werner, our first principle underlies our secular moral code. Moreover, whether "inherent worth" is mentioned or not, our political discourse is full of questions where the issue is whether people have inherent worth. Isn't this what political arguments are about when we argue about who deserves healthcare, or how humane prisons should be, or whether it is morally right to torture terrorists for information? Isn't it at the heart of how people of color are treated? So we must be able to define arguments on inherent worth that are convincing not just to ourselves and our friends here, but to everyone, if we are to be able to support human rights.

For this reason and others, philosophers have for hundreds of years studied inherent worth, trying to see if there is some logical basis or proof for inherent worth and human rights. I have not, obviously, read all of the literature. But I have read some scholarly papers and skimmed some books, and I want to call to your attention today to a paper by Louis Pojman. Pojman died in 2005. He was a professor emeritus of philosophy at West Point, a visiting scholar at Berkeley, NYU, and Cambridge University, among many other places, and an ordained minister in the Reformed Church of America. He wrote and had published over a hundred philosophy textbooks and anthologies. In the paper I am discussing today, he listed the 10 different arguments for inherent worth that are given some credence today. Some of these are old arguments—from Kant and before—and some are modern. In his paper he shredded all of them for their lack of logic and reasonable basis. What the author, and other authors I read, concluded was that if you are a religious person you may, depending on your beliefs, have logical grounds for assuming inherent worth—that is, logical given your belief system. You might cite, for instance, the statement in Genesis that people are created in the image and likeness of God, or you might believe that all people have a "divine spark" or a soul. I think of Hindus who greet each other with the word "namaste", which was translated for me as "the divine in me greets the divine in you". If you believe in these or similar things, then you could logically believe in universal inherent worth. But your belief follows logically from your illogical belief in your religion. So your argument does not work for those of us who do not

believe as you do. Pojman, and other authors I read, confessed that they were stuck for a logical secular argument for inherent worth, especially since there are people around—the evildoers in modern life and in history—who don't obviously seem to have much worth.

I will give you an example of one of the arguments that Pojman takes apart. It is a syllogism. It goes like this. I value myself because I have the possibility for positive and negative experiences. All other humans are similar to me in this way. Therefore I must value everyone. There are a couple of problems with this. Perhaps you don't find reasons to value yourself—you don't accept the first statement. Then everyone else is doomed also because they are like you. Or perhaps, like many of us, you value yourself because of what you do, because of your accomplishments or virtue, not because you have a human body capable of experiences. Then others who can't or don't do those things you value don't qualify for inherent worth. So the argument fails. Similarly, it was relatively easy for Pojman to demolish the other arguments. And he finally confessed himself stuck for a logical or convincing basis for inherent worth.

One argument that came up in many places in my reading as almost a fallback when all else failed was the argument that just being alive gives a person worth. The idea is that being alive means you are complex, hard to make, hard to replace, and therefore have worth. But think of the evil-doers of history and today-- Jack the Ripper, some people in ISIS, Hitler. Were they worthy of respect, did they have moral worth, simply because they were alive? One needs a convincing argument why that would be so, and I think anatomy is not enough.

So let's leave the philosophers and try a more psychological approach. Here is a statement that probably all of you can agree with. Babies are good and engaging and have potential, and all of them have worth. So perhaps we can believe that everyone starts out with some level of worth. Can we lose it later or is it permanent—is it "inherent" in us at all ages? I think it is interesting, and we should think about, just how much Sigmund Freud and his intellectual descendants influence your answer. Freud revolutionized our thinking about people, at least in the West, by telling us that their bad behavior had a cause and could be cured. So if I beat my child, I do it because I was beaten as a child and because I am an alcoholic, and I'm an alcoholic because I am genetically prone to alcoholism and that is being expressed because of the difficulties of my life. So it is not my fault that I beat my child, and with treatment I can improve, repair the damage, and bring back to the surface my worthy self. This view replaced, or is in opposition to, a view of personal responsibility for our actions—the paradigm that we are what we do, that we are to blame for our bad actions. So if I am a person who hurts people for pleasure, with no remorse, throughout my adult life, then that is what I am—a bad person. I don't know anyone who holds just one of these views. We instead oscillate back and forth between them, between blame and no-blame.

So how do we decide which is right? How do we decide whether people always have worth or redeeming good in them, even if it is never seen? I don't believe that anyone knows. Science as of today will not tell us. As you heard in the second reading, there is some glimmer of an answer from science. There is evidence that people with certain genes are nine times more likely than other people to be violent as adults. But we really don't know much about that, or

when those genes express themselves. So I would say that no one knows whether we all have a worthy self inside or not. Since we don't know, I conclude that it is a personal choice that each of us must make whether to assume there is good, or inherent worth still in there. Let me give you a few examples to think about as you decide.

Eve Decker, a friend who is a wise woman and a serious committed Western Buddhist, told me that she believes that each of us has a raw and vulnerable human heart, and that for her that is each person's possibility for redemption and their inherent worth. I offer this for your consideration because I think that it is one good and thoughtful answer. But I will also give you a counter-story. A minister in our denomination, William Schulz, is presently the head of our social justice wing, the UUSC. Reverend Schultz was for eight years the head of the Unitarian Universalist Association, and for 12 years the director of Amnesty International. While at Amnesty International he met many torture victims and read reports on many more. He met torturers and stood in places where torture had taken place. And when he left Amnesty he preached a sermon in which he said that he no longer believed in the inherent worth of all people. He had met people that he was sure no longer had worth. Perhaps those of us who believe in universal, permanent, inherent, worth have just never encountered the reality that Reverend Schulz saw. Perhaps we believe a fairy tale we were able to spin about human character because we have been sheltered. I don't know.

Ultimately, what is my answer? I don't know how to know whether Bill Schulz is right and there is no inherent worth, nothing good, in some people, or whether something is there. And I try not to make decisions if I don't know the facts. So I will probably never decide whether I believe in our first principle. But in thinking long and hard about this I have realized that I do know some things that are important. I know about the consequences that follow when you decide that some people do not have worth. We know where that leads. It leads to poor people without healthcare. Ask the libertarians and they will give you arguments why the poor aren't worthy. It leads to prisons where prisoners are attacked and raped, not just by other prisoners but also by guards. They are convinced that prisoners have no worth. It leads to the incident at Abu Ghraib, and illegal torture, and extraordinary rendition. And it is at the heart of all acts of racism.

I'd like to point out a few lessons from this list. First of all, we aren't very good at deciding who has worth—at sorting out the good from the evil people. Our prisons hold many innocent people, and we don't know who they are. And of course almost all people of color and poor people are good, and deserve all the benefits that others enjoy. But there are many people who don't seem to see this. And here is a point that is important to me. No matter how evil we believe a person to be, if we treat them badly it changes us. This is the most obvious lesson of Abu Ghraib. I learned it in a small way from personal experience in my relationship with my daughter's father. When he treated me badly it would have been easiest to act badly right back. But I learned very quickly that that is the way to lose yourself and your character. The battle in all of this is not to win, the battle is to hold onto the person you want to be. For these reasons--because we aren't able to judge worth well, even to who is innocent and who is not; because of the damage to the character of society and ourselves if we treat even bad people badly; and

because of the damage to our human and civil rights laws of believing that some people are of lesser worth, I believe we must *act* as if our first principle is true, even if it is not.

I would rewrite our first principle to what it should have been: "We covenant to treat every person as if he or she had inherent worth." It was after finally arriving at this conclusion that I happened to find out about Bill Shultz's and read his sermon on the internet, and I found that he came at the end to the same conclusion. And he said something very interesting. He said that we UUs we need to "assign worth" to each person and "teach dignity."

So if you are in an argument about human rights, my advice is not to try to use our first principle as an argument. You can't prove it. You may not even be able to believe it. Talk rather about the things I just mentioned. Talk about the fact that we are not good at judging which people have worth. Talk about the damage to our human rights laws if we believe that some people have less worth than others, and about the damage to the character of society and ourselves if we treat anyone badly.

As a final comment, I have some information which might be useful to some of those of you who may have decided during the last 20 minutes that Vlad the Impaler, for instance, had no inherent worth. I was raised in the Catholic Church. When I was 4 years old I noticed that there was no proof for God, and became a skeptic. So I spent most of my time when I was in church and Sunday school, from age 4 until adulthood, feeling guilty and feeling like I needed to hide my thoughts because I didn't believe much of what I heard. So when I realized that I might not believe our first UU principle, I felt like it was happening again. I couldn't even be a good Unitarian! I couldn't even believe the first principle! So I nervously asked Jim Nelson, our former senior minister, what it means if a UU does not believe our first principle. He told me that the UU principles were adopted by the UUA after much debate and voting, and each congregation gets to decide what to make of them. And our church never voted. So as you may have hoped, at Neighborhood Church in Pasadena, at least, if you decide that Vlad the Impaler had no inherent worth, you can still sit in church every week, think and question, and still belong.

Amen to that, and blessed be to whatever god, goddess or spirit may or may not exist out there.