

## Resources for Spiritual Exploration in Community

JUNE 2016: “the inherent worth and dignity of every person”

Suggested chalice lighting:

The confusion between love and approval is so common in our culture that we have found it necessary to create a special rare sub-category of love, “Unconditional Love.” Of course love, like grace, is never earned. All love is unconditional. Anything we need to earn is only approval. *Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen*

### I. Introduction

Article II, Section C-2.1 of the Bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association begins with these words:

*We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote*

followed by seven bullet points. These are what we call the Principles. Most of us have heard the language, or read it as printed in the order of service. The first principle is perhaps the most challenging:

- *The inherent worth and dignity of every person.*

It seems plain enough. Everybody has value, inherently and irrevocably. Everyone matters. Is what we are trying to say really that simple?

### II. CONNECT: Readings

A gift can be refused or dishonored, one can vainly imagine oneself deserving of a gift, a gift can be squandered or misconstrued, one may despise or be threatened by the generosity of the giver, but no responses such as these in any way negate the event of the gift, impair its value, or impeach the donor. It is thus when one person makes a gift to another. *William Stringfellow*

To welcome the stranger is to acknowledge him as a human made in God’s image; it is to treat her as one of equal worth with ourselves—indeed, as one who may teach us something out of the richness of experiences different from our own. The stranger’s gifts may come to a family circle or to a society. Yet the undocumented foreigner...is too often not greeted with hospitality or even acknowledged as a human being in God’s image. *Ana Maria Pineda*

I realized that I was the same person whether scrubbing a floor or writing a poem, that my dignity as a being was in no way dependent upon the role which I had at any moment to assume—for all such roles are merely that, and the person free of them all. *Kathleen Raine*

### III. GROW: Questions for exploration, reflection, discussion

- Inherent – what does that mean, in real life, talking about the worth of people?
- How much does a person’s behavior (heroic or heinous) determine or affect their worth?
- If we agree that everyone has it, does everyone have it in equal measure? Are some *more* worthy? Can people diminish their worth and dignity by their actions?
- What is the difference between *worth* and *dignity* – why name them both?
- What do we mean by worth? In customary usage, worth always has an indirect object – worth to whom? Or to what?  
Is there some evaluator, some judge of worth, in this context? Is it us?
- What do we mean by dignity? In customary usage, dignity is not inherent but displayed. Does someone have to exhibit or manifest dignity in some way in order for us to say they *have* it? Or are we talking about something else?

### IV. SERVE: What’s Next

We affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person when we

- Greet a stranger with a smile;
- Offer comfort and hospitality to one in distress;
- Display patience and empathy with unpleasant people in our daily lives;
- Consider the pain and fear that lies beneath hostility;
- Avoid violence in word and gesture;
- Share out of our abundance, and allow others to share with us out of theirs.

We promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person when we

- Listen, without interruption or judgment;
- Vote for and communicate with local officials who make decisions affecting citizens who are less empowered – e.g., children, those in poverty, homeless people, people with disability, etc.;
- Speak up in the face of racial, religious or other bigotry;
- Stand with the object of bullying, and confront the bully;

Seek out the company of those whose experience is different from our own, and believe what they tell us about it;

Become engaged in the welfare of those whom others regard as worthless;

Teach these things – and show them – to our children.

## V. CONCLUSION

Reflect on how this experience felt. Were there moments in which you felt uncomfortable? Confused? Anxious? Affirmed? Eager? Hopeful? Surprised? What other feelings did you encounter?

If people in the group would like, allow them to share these things, without interrogation or challenge.

Suggested words for extinguishing chalice:

Unconditional love is a high spiritual state... It is the capacity to love so profoundly that it is without expectation but only deep appreciation of a uniqueness in each one of us that makes all comparisons meaningless. It is the recognition of the one soul that is our essential self. *Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen*