

WORTH AND DIGNITY 101
by Rev. Kit Ketcham, August 20, 2008

Sing with me if you remember this old hymn, and if you don't, just let us sing it to you:

There's a church in the valley by the wildwood,
No lovelier place in the dale;
No spot is so dear to my childhood,
As the little brown church in the vale.
Come to the church in the wildwood,
Oh, come to the church in the dale,
No spot is so dear to my childhood,
As the little brown church in the vale.

What a good old hymn to use as a springboard for talking about worth and dignity and the welcome that we extend to those who come looking for a place of peace, acceptance, and beauty. Thank you for indulging me! Now let me tell you a story that will sound familiar to many.

It was just a normal Sunday, with the normal familiar smiles and greetings as people passed by me before joining others in the sanctuary.

There had been the normal "hi, so nice to see you today!
and.....how's your mom?
and.....what do you hear from so and so?
and.....welcome to our UU congregation! would you like a nametag?
and.....yes, I think there is a plan to go out for a meal after the service; I hope you can come.
and.....how are you feeling these days?"

UU congregations are always on the lookout for visitors and this congregation was no different. We want to be able to say hello, offer a friendly smile----and a nametag!-----and demonstrate the best welcome we can offer to someone new, someone who is perhaps hurting, perhaps lonely, perhaps unfamiliar with UUism, or----perhaps a longtime UU looking for a new church home. It's our normal Sunday routine.

On this particular Sunday, however, members of this small congregation took one look at the visitor coming through the door and did a double take. No, it wasn't President Bush, coming to see how we liked his latest environmental action or economic recession response; it wasn't some glamorous movie star or bedraggled game show survivor; it wasn't the mayor of the small town or any other well known local personage.

This visitor's appearance was startling in itself, and I could feel my own apprehensions rise up. Why would anyone choose to look the way this person did? I quickly began to think about how best to approach this individual; how would others in the congregation respond to him?

And then, I saw one of our greeters step forward toward our visitor and the two ordinary looking people who had come in with him. I saw a friendly smile on the greeter's face and then a handshake; I watched as the greeter helped them prepare nametags and gave them orders of service; and when the three visitors came to where I was standing, outside the sanctuary door, I had been given a clear model for how we were going to welcome our unusual visitor.

“Cat”, as we came to know him that day, is a Native American who has adopted the unusual practice of changing his appearance to resemble that of his totem animal, a tiger. Cat is tattooed with tiger-like markings; he uses special contact lenses to give his eyes a catlike shape and color; his nails are shaped into claws; his face has been surgically altered to a more feline shape and his teeth are sharp and fang-like.

Cat is not your typical visitor. Wherever he goes in the community, people stop and stare and perhaps walk the other way. Now, I don't know all the reasons Cat looks the way he does. There are lots of questions in my mind about how he has chosen this path.

But on that day, my task and that of the rest of us attending that service was to welcome Cat and his friends, to make a place for them among us, to offer them the simple hospitality of our sacred space, of our worship time, to invite them to have a cup of coffee and a cookie after the service, to go with our group to the Chinese place for a meal after church.

I tell this story today to remind us of the challenge we met together about three years ago, when Cat and his friends visited us and of the respect and friendliness they received from this congregation, despite our being taken aback and feeling somewhat frightened by Cat's unusual appearance, despite feeling protective of our children and ourselves, despite wondering if we were doing the right thing.

Members since that time have revealed to me their deep concern about that moment in our congregational life, having been through hard times while striving to be understanding and accepting of someone very different and difficult. Cat turned out to be no real threat during his visit here but we didn't know that when we first met him.

I have a lifetime behind me of defending people who are radically different; I also have the more negative habit of not always listening deeply to people's concerns about those who are radically different, whether that be in appearance or behavior. For that I'm sorry and vow to do better. But recognizing and acknowledging that shortcoming has given me a broader perspective on how we understand and implement our First Principle.

It's hard to know how to fully embrace our First Principle, of affirming and promoting the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We have an obligation to our community to keep our children safe, to keep each other safe, to the best of our ability. And that obligation sometimes clashes with our desire to see each person as having inherent worth and dignity.

So we proceed with caution. On that day over three years ago, we acted in good faith and welcomed a stranger, not knowing what effect his presence might have in our lives. But folks' fears were real and I regret not acknowledging them as well as I might have, in my joy at seeing the calm welcome and acceptance of a truly unusual person.

I hope that those of you who felt your fears unheard and unappreciated will forgive me for being obtuse at that time. What I've learned since then, with your help, has deepened my understanding of what it means to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. I guess I'll never be too old to learn something new!

What I have come to realize is that when we sense danger, we respond in protective ways. Greg McKendry of the Knoxville UU church displayed this protectiveness a few weeks ago when he saw a man approach the sanctuary doors, holding a gun. He stepped in front of the shooter and received the blast himself. It's the most dramatic protectiveness we humans can provide for our loved ones---to give our lives.

It seems to me that our First Principle is a challenge to our inborn need to protect ourselves, our loved ones, and our homes. Perhaps each of our seven principles offers this kind of challenge, to modify and replace an inborn reaction with a more conscious, perhaps more compassionate, less immediately judgmental response.

When we sign up to be Unitarian Universalists, we sign up to do heavy work, the heavy work of altering and even overriding our natural human impulses to be afraid, to be angry, to judge, to defend. None of these behaviors is necessarily wrong in itself; it's just that we need to make sure that they are not always our default position!

Our Principles challenge us to dig deep for a new way of responding-- not careless, so that we unnecessarily endanger ourselves and others, but so that we can move beyond primal reactions of self-protection and into a new response tempered by compassion and kindness, without giving up good sense, striving to understand another being.

For our primal reactions are largely there to insure our survival; they are essential responses and yet they get in our way sometimes. They can keep us from offering compassion and kindness at times when these responses are more appropriate and more helpful.

Our First Principle may be our hardest principle, and yet it is foundational to the rest. We must acknowledge our inevitable human first gut reaction, and yet we also must take our courage in both hands, and find ways to love our neighbor who is scary.

As I was preparing for today, I took note of the many ways we UUUs have lived out our First Principle. We have historically been the champions of justice for marginalized groups and humanitarian issues for centuries; we have stumped for women's suffrage, abolition of slavery, democratic process in government, reproductive freedom, religious freedom, humane treatment of the insane, of prisoners, of children, of animals, education for all, abolishment of torture, withdrawal from inhumane wars, protection of the environment, civil rights for people of color and sexual minorities and the differently abled. And each cause has been adopted because we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of all humankind, in fact, of all beings.

All of these causes have put us in danger, individually and as a movement. Our religious ancestors have been ridiculed, imprisoned, tortured, and even murdered. Yet they responded out of their own inherent worth and dignity, recognizing that compassion and kindness would accomplish more than fear. We have many reasons to be quietly proud of our religious heritage. But new challenges crop up daily, it seems.

What do we do about issues like sex offenders or other felons who may want to visit or join us? What do we do about people whose behavior is out of bounds or dangerous? What kinds of safeguards are reasonable and yet free us to do the important work of welcoming and accepting our neighbor?

There aren't any easy, quick answers to these questions, so we have done our best to address these issues by requiring background checks of our staff and the volunteers who work with our children, by consulting with the authorities about offenders, by considering covenants between us which outline our responsibilities to each other as members and friends of this congregation.

Some congregations, in the wake of the Knoxville tragedy where two people were shot and killed by an intruder into a church service, have begun to review their safety policies.

Others have considered a variety of protective responses. We will doubtless consider our own safety issues at UUCWI as well. But I am inclined to think that it is better that we should face those who scare us with the innocence of love, rather than an expectation of evil.

Where do we find that innocence of love? I believe we find it when we embrace and live out of our own inherent worth and dignity. For it isn't just in others that this quality lives, it is our own identity as well.

Sometimes we act in fear and anger because we are afraid we are not worthy of love. Sometimes our sense of worth and dignity has been damaged by life's events and we are shaky about our own value. Sometimes we have loved and have been hurt in return. Sometimes our dignity has been shattered by humiliation and rejection.

We have all had these kinds of damaging events in our lives. And they shape us, they can make it hard to find worth and dignity in others. My own reaction is often to overcompensate for my shortcomings in this area, and this gets me into trouble too!

So we're all kinda in the same boat together---knowing that we want to recognize and honor the inherent worth and dignity of each person yet knowing too that we ourselves do not always recognize and honor our own inherent worth and dignity. This being human is hard work.

That's one of the functions of a faith community---we have others to help us shore up our own sense of inherent worthiness and dignity. We can't do this very well on our own. If our own history has damaged our sense of worth and dignity, we need others to help rebuild it.

My experience has led me to believe that our early families are where we learn that we have inherent worth and dignity. We learn this from the treatment we receive from parents, from siblings, from other family members and other adults. If they treat us with respect and kindness, we learn to trust others and to give others that same respect and kindness. If we receive disrespect and cruelty, we can learn to mistrust and mistreat others.

Later in life, our experience with other humans also shapes our sense of worth and dignity. Those individuals who are the most destructive in our society are those, I believe, who were robbed of their sense of worth and dignity as they grew up. Even the worst offender, even someone like Hitler, I believe, did have worth and dignity as an infant. But somehow that inherent worthiness was demolished and a despotic tyrant emerged, with a cruel sense of entitlement and warped superiority.

Very few individuals suffer this tragic shaping into monster-hood, but most of us do experience some tough knocks in our lives and are shaped by them. We usually recognize these bruises and dings in our personalities and make an effort to heal them, with the help of therapists, doctors, friends, and family.

A faith community can be a wonderful resource for healing the soul, knitting back together the rips and tears in our sense of self-worth. Right here, today, I'll bet there are those of you who feel your life has been made much better by your association with a faith community, perhaps even this

one. I know that this community helped me heal after a difficult ministry in another church.

We have a number of visitors here with us today. Some of you are thinking about joining us as we begin our new adventure, with our new opportunities and resources. I hope you will do that. I hope you will find friends here, companions on your spiritual path, women and men and children and youth who will give you the kind of support and encouragement and love that you need. And we hope you in turn will offer your gifts to this community, loving us and being our companion on the road as we explore what it means to be religious liberals in our world today.

There's a lot of opportunity to serve out there in our larger community and also a lot of opportunity to give and to receive here in our midst. I hope you will join us in serving each other and the larger community of Whidbey Island as we discover what it means to affirm and promote the values of Unitarian Universalism and to live in love and service to all humankind, of all beings.

Let's pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

CLOSING HYMN: #159, This is my song.

BENEDICTION: Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that all beings have worth and dignity, and that it is a wonderful gift of life to be able to set aside our fears and get to know those who seem different from us. May we offer kindness and compassion to all those on life's road, grateful for the opportunity to stretch our horizons and love our neighbors and ourselves. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.