

Inherent Worth and Dignity Misconstrued  
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet  
Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman, October 29, 2017

Those of you who were here a week ago know that the topic of my sermon then was the same as what I am speaking on today, our First Principle. Last week I focused on the positive side of that Principle which asserts the inherent worth and dignity of every person. But as is often the case in life, there can be a negative side to things, even something that is intended to be affirming and positive. And as the Rev. Dr. Fred Muir points out in our reading this morning, our First Principle can be interpreted or misconstrued in a way that turns the value it lifts up in a direction that can become negative.

It is likely that not everyone here today was present for the service a week ago. So I want to begin on a positive note by briefly recalling what I shared last Sunday. For those of you who were here for that service this is review. If I miss something that was important to you, I hope you will share whatever that was with those who are hearing this for the first time.

Last week I talked about the origins of our First Principle and the reason it holds the number one slot in our list of Seven Principles. Its roots go all the way back to the third chapter of the Book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible. It is from that story of Adam and Eve eating of the forbidden fruit that the concept of original human sin is derived. Our First Principle counters the concept that we are first and foremost sinful by asserting that which is positive about every person—namely that each and every person has inherent worth and dignity. I stepped out on a limb by suggesting that the message in our First Principle is a saving message for those who have been taught or have come to believe that they are inadequate, defective or born into sin. And I indicated that our First Principle is not easy to live out. It asks us to open our hearts to a degree that we may find very difficult to do at times or with some people. This is not an easy Principle for any of us to fully live out. There are all sorts of reasons this is the case. One reason in particular though makes it especially difficult. It is a reason that, without even realizing it, leads us to sometimes misconstrue what our first Principle says and means.

This is illustrated clearly in our reading. Let's hear again the words of Rev. Muir. He states; "The inherent worth and dignity of the individual is not just our First Principle as UUs: often it is our defining principle." I would ask you to take a moment to turn to the back of your Order of Service. Notice how our first Principle is written there. (pause) Now hear again what Muir wrote; "The inherent worth and dignity of the individual is not just our First Principle as UUs: often it is our defining principle." Notice that the words "every person" have been changed to "the individual." In my experience we UUs are typically very particular about our words. Generally we want to say what we mean and mean what we say. Clearly, there is a mismatch between what Muir has written and the words of our First Principle.

You might think this is a small and insignificant point. Some of you may think I am being critical of Rev. Muir and his selection of words. On the contrary, I was present on June 20, 2012 when he delivered the Berry Street Essay that our reading this morning comes from. I point out his use of words because he was making a very deliberate and important point in his word choice. You can find more of what is contained in his essay

in the Winter 2012 edition of UU World Magazine. If you read that article or his full Berry Street Essay I believe you will clearly recognize that what I am saying is true.

And in regards to being nit-picky, I had to address the issue of what our First Principle actually states with a congregation I served previously. That congregation had an advertisement on the local PBS radio station that used the same wording that Rev. Muir did. The ad however, was not intended to stimulate deeper thinking about our First Principle. Instead of stating that Unitarian Universalism affirms and promotes the inherent worth and dignity of every person, it stated that UU's recognize the inherent worth and dignity of the individual. It seems to me that when the words "every person" get replaced with "the individual" the essence of our first Principle changes, possibly only slightly and subtly, but it changes none the less. And the change, in my estimation, is not in a positive direction. When "the individual" replaces "every person" we start down a path that can be limiting and even harmful. It is a path that shifts our focus from all people, to one person. It moves away from the inclusiveness that "every person" implies and focuses our attention instead on one person, the individual. This seemingly minor change in words has the tendency to alter how we perceive and think about what our First Principle is affirming. This word change can have us misconstrue what our Principle seeks to promote by diverting our attention from all people to the individual. This small shift could even be interpreted as an endorsement or encouragement of individualism along with some of its worst elements, namely entitlement, exclusiveness and self-absorption. It seems to me that all three of these negative elements of individualism are showing up in our country to a degree that is far beyond what is beneficial or healthy for any of us. Entitlement, exclusiveness and self-absorption are present and prevalent in at least three other destructive "isms" that are far too common in our country today. These are racism, sexism and nationalism. I must say that I don't know of any scientific research that correlates individualism with any of these issues. That said, the similarities I see between the ramifications of individualism and the other three "isms" I just mentioned makes me wonder what connections there may be. That might just be a topic for a future sermon.

But now I want to return to what we heard in our reading. Muir warns us about the potential harm that can result when we misconstrue the intent and purpose of our First Principle. He also points out a strand of our faith tradition which offers us more hope and promise than individualism ever could. Let's hear his words again.

"we frequently overlook another strand of our tradition in our Association's Principles and Purposes, another story about ourselves that can deepen and grow our future. It is not the language of individualism, not of the iChurch, but of covenant. "As free congregations we promis[e] to one another our mutual trust and support."

He then goes on.

"We cannot do both covenant and individualism; individuality, yes, but not individualism. Articulating and living our Principles as a commitment to covenant—creating and sustaining community by "promising to one another our mutual trust and support"—this takes extra effort...."

This takes extra effort. How right he is. I would say that his assertion is both very true and a significant understatement at the same time. Keeping the worst elements of individualism in check, while maintaining and supporting individuality and building a sustainable community is an incredibly difficult task. And for Unitarian Universalists it may be even more difficult than for those in some other religious traditions. We don't have someone on high who will tell us specifically how we need to act. Guilt, shame and fear aren't typically used in our congregations to get people to act in healthier or more appropriate ways. And we don't have one authoritative text that informs us how both individuality and a healthy, sustainable community can be nurtured and sustained. It seems to me that Muir is correct when he suggests that covenant is the strand of our faith tradition that holds the most promise for us in dealing with this difficult task.

Many of you have likely heard me share my views about covenant. I have talked about covenant in numerous committee meetings as well as in sermons I have delivered previously. Today I would like to speak directly to the important and positive place covenant holds in my life. As a point from which both to begin and to diverge, I want to share the quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson that our reading today began with. Remember that Muir believes Emerson had an important role in the level of individualism that can be found in Unitarian Universalism today. Emerson wrote "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string." He also wrote "No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature." Like Muir, at certain times in my life, I have found the sentiments Emerson put forth to be very inspiring and attractive. As I look back however, I am certain that my nature was not always my highest nature. I imagine some of you may relate to what I am stating here. I would say there were times when the nature I was following originated in that part of my brain I inherited from my far, far distant ancestors—my reptilian ancestors. And there have been times when I chose to trust my nature while ignoring what those who loved and cared about me were attempting to share with me. Today I realize that when I veer off the road of individuality and go down the narrow path of individualism, I have a tendency to pay far too little attention to my highest nature. When I set my course toward the path of individualism, the likelihood that I will be able to honor the worth and dignity of others is reduced, and not just a little but a lot. I have discovered that there is a way for me to be able both to maintain my individuality and to respect and honor the community I am an integral part of. I have discovered that when I attend to and honor the covenants I have with those I am in deep relationship with, my individuality is affirmed and healthy. When I attend to and honor the covenants I have with those I am in deep relationship with, my presence is a support and an asset to the community I am a part of.

From this place of awareness I recognize that the challenge of fully living out our First Principle requires that I rise above many aspects of my nature. This Principle calls me to honor and respect those I encounter as I would want others to honor and respect me. I feel quite humble when I consider how challenging it is to live up to what our First Principle states. And when I think about the covenants I am called to honor my humility increases.

How then am I, and are we, going to face this challenge of keeping the tendency toward individualism in check? And how shall I, and we, go about building the beloved community that Muir speaks of—the beloved community where individuality and community are vibrant and healthy? And how can I, how can we, hope to fully affirm and

promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person? To paraphrase a musical group from my youth, a group you might be familiar with; "I'm gonna try with a little help from my friends. We'll get by with a little help from our friends." We can do it friends. We can do it by being clear about, and by honoring, the covenants which are the bonds between us.

May it be so.