

*Inherent Worth and Dignity*  
*(Seven Principles series)*  
(Version 1a)

A Sunday service led by the  
Reverend Michael Walker, Interim Minister

Presented on September 18, 2016, at the  
*Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania*

CALL TO WORSHIP (by Steve Stock)<sup>1</sup>

*We light this chalice to celebrate the inherent worth and dignity of every person, to reaffirm the historic pledge of liberal religion to seek that justice which transcends mere legality and moves toward the resolution of a true equality; and to share that love which is ultimately beyond even our cherished reason, that love which unites us.*

**May it ever be so and blessed be you all!**

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<sup>1</sup> 'Chalice Lighting' by Steve Stock, in *The Seven Principles in Word and Worship*, Ellen Brandenburg, Ed. (Boston: Skinner House, 2007), pp. 12-13.

SILENT JOYS AND SORROWS (**Market St. only**)

One day, a longtime member and participant here at Market Street, **Leta Beam**, suggested to the Worship Team that we consider creating some form of Joys & Sorrows ritual for this service. This was to folks to express something weighing on their hearts, while also encouraging a sense of community by having a shared practice. After much discussion and brainstorming, the Worship Team came up with the idea of Silent Joys & Sorrows, accompanied by music. If you feel called to mark some joy or sorrow in your personal life, you are invited to come forward and choose a stone from the heart-basket; hold it, admire it, imagine your joy or sorrow coming to reside in this symbol. Of course, these stones can mean whatever you want them to, but I picked

out these colors based on the sky. Joys might be blue for clear skies, or yellow for sunny skies (that was **Sara Palmer**'s idea), while the darker stones can symbolize your sorrows, as an overcast or stormy sky.

If you have a joy or sorrow you wish to acknowledge, please come forward.

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MEDITATION (by Rev. Michael Walker)

We hold these Joys and these Sorrows in our hearts and minds, so our friends do not have to carry them alone. You are invited now into a few moments of silence and meditation.

**May it ever be so and blessed be you all!**

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OFFERING

This congregation offers a liberal spiritual home to seekers from all walks of life. We are proud of the work we do in the community, the classes we offer for children and adults, for the care and concern provided by this community and its staff, and for these two beautiful campuses that have each become a spiritual home for so many.

If you are here for the first time, we invite you to let the offering basket pass you by, because you are our honored guest. And if you have made this your spiritual home, we thank you for your continuing generosity.

Every month, we also collect donations during the Offering to support a worthy cause. This month, our Share-the-Plate Recipient is \_\_\_\_\_.

If you are writing a check, please specify on the Memo line whether this is for your Pledge, an offering to UCH, or for the Share-the-Plate recipient.

Thank you, all, for your generosity. This morning's offering will now be received.

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*Inherent Worth and Dignity*  
(Seven Principles series)  
Reverend Michael Walker

A while back, one of our youth noted that we often mention the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism, but don't say much about the meaning of each. So, over the course of this year, I will present a series of seven sermons about the Principles, going deeper into each one. Today, I'm talking about the First Principle, which states that *we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.*<sup>2</sup> We can take this a step further, by noting that there is a movement within the UUA to

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles>

change that statement to read that we *affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every being* (which includes all living things, and not just people.)

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It seems obvious, doesn't it? This is the UU version of the Golden Rule, which has appeared in many cultures in some variation of "*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*" Our movement's strong affinity for social justice and action is also rooted in this. When we see others in our society who are not treated with dignity, whose worth is not cherished and respected, then our response is to mobilize and work to change that.

Our Principles are more than words on a page. They are directly related to how we choose to live our lives and how we choose to act, especially when faced

with challenges and problems in our lives. We also use this principle as a blanket approach to the ills of society.

I suppose that UUs are not alone in lifting up this concept of inherent worth, but we have certainly made it a cornerstone of our faith (however you define faith). In my life, I became aware of this as a teen in the early 80s, at a point in American history in which the gay community had not yet experienced so many victories in the effort to recognize our civil rights. I've spoken before about being a gay teenager in a very small, conservative mountain town, and my family belonged to a small fundamentalist church. As a young person who knew myself to be different, the messages around me were not affirming of my worth and dignity. These experiences of childhood and adolescence, once I

realized that I would not be affirmed and accepted when I came out of the closet, is what set me on my lifelong path for truth and meaning that would affirm my self-worth and dignity. This continues to be aspirational; I doubt I will ever arrive at a moment in my life when I can say:

*I did it. I made it. All is now well; our society is now equitable to all. I have achieved a sense of completeness, now that I fully affirm my own worth and dignity. Furthermore, recognition of the inherent worth and dignity of all people is now universal.*

Well that's some Pollyanna-rubbish. No, I don't think that will happen in my lifetime, because it is a process and actions that we take are critical, not some utopian future ideal that would mark the putative *completion* of

the process.

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Perhaps you have heard it said, that our affirmation of inherent worth and dignity means that we accept anyone and any behavior – but, that is simply not true. Our respect of the inherent worth and dignity of people does not excuse the misbehavior or crimes committed by others. Every time a discussion of the First Principle comes up in our churches, it does not take long before someone asks about some person that has committed an atrocity. Perhaps you are familiar with Godwin’s Law, regarding difficult discussions that eventually devolve until someone invokes the name of Hitler. I heard someone say once that he had trouble seeing the inherent worth and dignity in Osama bin Laden, after 9/11 – we

acknowledged the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that day last week.

In the end, we are judged by our actions – whether that is you and me, or someone known to have done some evil in the world. You may or may not believe that God will judge us, but history surely will. I will go out on a limb and say that it seems possible to recognize the inherent worth of person, even when they have done something horrible. The meaning of *inherent* is that the potential is innate, born into each of us. Some people had a dysfunctional upbringing, or a mental illness, or made poor life choices – and yet, still were born with innate worth. This is not the same as that phrase from Christianity: *love the sinner, hate the sin*. We have very different ideas about what *sin* might be, and it’s not generally considered a very helpful concept in the UU

worldview. But, we still stumble, when we try to apply the First UU Principle to someone who has committed egregious harm or death to others.

Perhaps it is easier to take a wider view, and apply our aspirational principles to people, rather than to individual persons. But, easy is not always best. Not letting ourselves off the hook, how do we deal with monsters in our midst? I'd like to share a story told by one of my colleagues, the Rev. Patricia Tummino:<sup>3</sup>

*When he was twenty years old, Aikido martial arts expert, Terry Dobson, was on a train in Tokyo when a huge, drunk and dirty laborer staggered into his car screaming wildly. This*

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<sup>3</sup> [bitomagic.com/uvuu/sermons/inherentlydifficultfirstprinciple.pdf](http://bitomagic.com/uvuu/sermons/inherentlydifficultfirstprinciple.pdf)

*drunken man swung at a woman holding a baby, knocking her over, then advanced looking for other victims.*

*Although Aikido is an art of reconciliation – it studies how to resolve conflict, not start it – Dobson admitted that in his heart he had always wanted a legitimate opportunity whereby he might save the innocent by destroying the guilty. And this was it. He blew the brute a kiss, successfully attracting his ire. He was going to flatten this guy.*

*But just as the drunk hauled off to hit him a voice from the side called out, “Hey!” and a little old man, beaming happily, invited the drunk to sit down. As he defiantly stood his ground, the immaculate little gentleman asked the drunk what*

*he'd been drinking. He ignored the swearing which he got in reply and then conjectured "sake?" – saying in a pleased voice that he and his wife enjoyed sake often. He smiled into the dirty lout's face. The man stopped and looked confused, and then suddenly he was sobbing, admitting that his wife was dead, that he had no home and no job, and he was ashamed of himself.*

*The Aikido expert had seen and was ready to respond to a "human monster;" but the old man assumed "a spark of the divine." Had the drunk been flattened he would have been arrested and Dobson would have been a hero. The story as it played out illuminates everything that is so difficult about living the First Principle: when the*

*Aikido expert left the train the drunk's head was in the old man's lap. So what should happen next? Perhaps no one has a clear answer. [...]*

*In ordinary life that is where our idealism falls apart. Belief in humanity's depravity allows us to feel all too good about snuffing out evil or removing or isolating those who experience problems. But when we do this we are, in fact, discarding our own failures. There were two ... on that train capable of intervening on behalf of those who were in danger. Had the little old man not been present it would have been appropriate to deck the drunk because he was a danger to everyone. It is good to have a variety of responses available.*

*Belief in the worth and dignity of every person forces us, as people in relationship, neighbors, if you will, to own physical, psychic, structural, and emotional violence as evidence of our mutual failure in our collective quest for the divine. Living the First Principle also leaves us to assume tremendous responsibilities for those in need when our lives are already enormously burdened. But that's what it's all about.*

Perhaps that was a moment when the Aikido expert was reminded to *do unto others as you would have them do unto you...* We do not know what weighs on the hearts of another person, or what emotional or mental pitfalls lay before them. We can only walk our path, invite others to walk with us, and try to lift up that sense of

inherent worth with our every action and word. I note also that in my colleague's reading, there was some consideration of finding within another person a spark of the divine. That, in another person, no matter how wrong in their action, is found some spark of worthiness that is not for us to judge, but only for us to try and see.

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The inability of some to see that spark of the divine, that internal flame of worthiness, has led to a movement to illuminate that hidden spark. Consider the First Principle in light of current events in our country. While not specifically a UU movement at all, there is none so obvious a movement to affirm worth and dignity in the present day as the one that has come to be known as *Black Lives Matter*. This movement does not say that

other lives don't matter; rather, it is a laser-focus on the right of young black people to have their inherent worth and their inherent dignity recognized. To be seen and to be respected, for that worthiness that resides within each of them. In a demographic that is disproportionately targeted, this simple statement – *Black Lives Matter* – has taken on such profound meaning. Yet another young life was taken within the last few days. When someone points out that that young person may have been involved with a crime at the time, we can remind them that that is what our judicial system is meant to determine, not the police on the street.

In so many of these shootings, a split second decision was made, leaving no time for a reasoned and fair response. In the shortness of such time, people rely

on their instincts, which are based in the cultural milieu in which one was raised. If one was, as I was, raised in a white, middle-class family, and one presumes that split second decisions are made based on our backgrounds, then we may easily make the mistake of upholding our own worth while holding another down. A decision to shoot a young black person by one relying on their roots of white privilege is a tragedy that can only be addressed by raising awareness of our privilege and how that has negatively impacted the lives of those outside one's own group. This is as much about recognizing the worthiness of the life of someone different than oneself, as it is about justice and rectitude. We address the system, in order to make changes, and must rely on the system to uphold justice, and to uphold the dignity of those who are not

from the dominant group.

It seems to me that our instinct evolved from an animal instinct for self-preservation, when faced with some danger. With that said, however, sentient and thinking animals intellectually and metaphorically understand dangers to be more general, what we may see as challenges, and have expanded our preservation instinct to include others, as well as ourselves. We are called to use our reason and intellect, and not just instinct, in our interactions with others. By recognizing the inherent worth of others, we uphold our own, as well.

In regards to shootings, in particular, it does not do for a white person to be judge, jury and executioner on the street, even if that person is a police officer or neighborhood watchman. In fact, in civic life and our

form of governance, it is the judiciary that is meant to uphold the worth and dignity of all people. I think that fact is sometimes forgotten.

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It has been sad to witness in recent months and even years the coarse discourse that has come to dominate modern politics: the vilifying of whole groups of people, the disrespect of entire ethnicities and religious communities, and the degradation of immigrants and people of color. It will only be through collective action that we may change this trend. In an article to the UU World by Doug Muder,<sup>4</sup> he shared that for him, the Principles are not about belief. He calls them “visions”; I might say *aspirations*. Muder then wrote:

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/i-dont-believe-seven-principles>

*The point of putting the Principles in the front of the hymnal and teaching them to our children isn't to assert their truth, or even to encourage you to nod along with the idea that they should be true. Unitarian Universalism is a commitment to envision a world in which the Principles have become true, to envision it so intensely and in such detail that it becomes a genuine possibility, and to join with others in making that possibility real.*

That is how these Principles becomes a personal road-map for us. Our calling is to envision a future in which our Principles have become a reality; in the meantime, it is our collective work to try and make that happen.

**May it ever be so and blessed be you all!**

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BENEDICTION (by Rev. Michael Walker)

When I stop to consider all we have contemplated today, and I say to myself, *that's an awfully tall order*, I try to recall these words by Edward Everett Hale:<sup>5</sup>

*I am only one,*

*But still I am one.*

*I cannot do everything,*

*But still I can do something;*

*And because I cannot do everything*

*I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.*

**May it ever be so and blessed be you all!**

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<sup>5</sup> 'Benediction' by Edward Everett Hale, in *The Seven Principles in Word and Worship*, Ellen Brandenburg, Ed. (Boston: Skinner House, 2007), p. 16.