

“Inherent Inner Worth”

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I feel truly blessed and grateful to have found such a rich community to be a part of since my move to Albuquerque. And given the powerful, beautiful, inspired worship services created here each week, I feel honored and humbled to be able to contribute to our shared worship life today.

In truth, I have not written or delivered a sermon in a long time—in several years. I stopped preaching back in 2012, at a point when I needed freedom to explore theologically without the responsibility of representing the Unitarian Universalist faith or of supporting the members of a congregation in their many and various journeys of meaning.

I needed to meet myself where I was, and to follow my longings and curiosities and inner promptings as they emerged. It had been many years since I had been able to do that without worrying whether what I was exploring would make sense to others or be of value to anyone else.

In the middle of this divergence, my life was struck with a great cataclysm when my love, my beautiful brilliant husband was diagnosed with brain cancer, became increasingly ill and incapacitated over three years, and eventually succumbed to the disease.

Throughout that struggle and loss, there was a certain disintegration that needed to happen to me spiritually. I was terrified and grieving and had no idea what was going on or how there could be meaning in such cruelty and pain.

I have always been a mystic, as you probably gathered from Angela’s introduction, and so I have always considered ideas and concepts about ultimate things to be secondary to the experience of ultimate things—either my direct personal experience, or gleaned from the testimonies and wisdom of sages, past and present.

I have tried to follow the lead of intuition and the pull of spirit even when it pulled me into a wilderness of unknowing, a chasm of nothingness.

In Christian mysticism, this wilderness could be called the dark night, or the Via Negativa, the negative path in which what is Real, what is Absolute is found through the death of everything you thought was something. In Sufism, this process is called Fana, annihilation. All the world’s mystical traditions have metaphors for the breaking down of a smaller self as a prerequisite to discovering a larger Self.

In the reading we heard from Eckhart Tolle, he refers to the process of falling through brokenness only to land unexpectedly in wholeness. This is also how he describes his own personal experience of awakening, which you can find in the beginning of his book, *The Power of Now*. He is one who knows of what he speaks.

My years of spiritual study with many wonderful teachers enabled me to trust the process of descent and devastation. I came to call it “God’s terrible love,” and am reminded of Kalil Gibran’s poignant line about how “the stone of the fruit must break that its heart may stand in the sun.”

After my husband’s death, I came into a period of openness that was so fierce and bewildering it was a kind of vertigo. There was a surge of searching and seeking and finding and growing, and a slow reintegration and knitting together of my spiritual and theological self into something that felt larger, stronger, freer and deeper than it had been before. And so I am different than I was when I left my last parish and the preaching life back in 2012.

When I was asked to speak today, I had to wrestle with whether I could and should come back to the pulpit, wondering if I had shifted too far onto the tail of the bell curve of common belief in Unitarian Universalist community.

I noticed that I did have a little bit of a fire in my belly to offer something, and I hope that I will be able to bridge my personal theological understanding with Unitarian Universalism in a way that will be helpful and meaningful.

If you have been part of Unitarian Universalist community for any length of time, you will know that rather than being a creed-based religion in which members assent to shared theological beliefs, ours is a principle-based, covenantal religion. As members, we covenant to affirm and promote certain principled ways of being together in community and ways of being in the world. The seven principles of UUism (which, if you aren’t familiar with them, you can find about 6 pages into the gray hymnal) express our ideal ethics of behavior.

Although together the seven principles form an integrated whole, I would suggest that the first and last express a tension in which the others play out. That tension is between the supreme value of the individual person on the one hand, and on the other hand, the sacredness of our connection, the sacredness of the community of life to which we belong and to which we are responsible.

To fulfill our human life spiritually and ethically we have to somehow balance these two energies—autonomy and interdependence. To try to remove one of these poles from the other is like trying to say that a coin has only one side. It is impossible.

In this sermon I am going to explore the first principle—the inherent worth and dignity of every person—and I’m going to take a theological approach to it may be a little uncommon. It may seem that I am suggesting that we do not need each other or that we are not responsible to one

another, but I am not saying that. I'm focusing on one thing but it doesn't mean the other thing stops being true. Please just keep that in mind as we proceed.

Affirming the inherent worth and dignity of every person is a serious ethic that we bring to our relations with others and to our social justice work. We are called to recognize and honor the worth and dignity of another human being without regard to any of the categories of value that pervade social culture:

A person's human value is not based on their accomplishments or apparent failures, the perceived characteristics of race, its not based on their material wealth or material poverty, not their level of education or profession or the degrees after their name, it's not changed by their sexuality or their gender or their physical attributes or their attractiveness, nor their physical or cognitive abilities or limits. It's not in any way about their social position in the world. It's not even affected by their moral character.

No social categories are relevant when it comes to perceiving the inherent worth and dignity of a human being. It has nothing to do with deserving, deserving more or less worth, and it cannot be earned.

How is this possible. Because as a religious community, we have embraced the word "inherent." INHERENT. This little word changes everything. This little word is theological!

From whence comes an inherent quality? Where does a quality come from if it is inherent?

It comes from inside. An inherent quality is intrinsic, inalienable, indivisible from the very essence of a thing. Inherent human worth is intrinsic to our nature—inalienable, indivisible, indestructible.

So, our first principle is saying, we are saying, that it is not conditions or relationships that give a person worth because that worth already exists, ontologically, in a person's very being. Inherent worth and dignity pre-exists a person's life conditions and remain true regardless of their experience or how they are treated.

The record of history and our current world conditions make it painfully clear that this is not a lived reality. Our spiritual and moral work as Unitarian Universalists—as human beings—is to transform our seeing, transform our practice, transform human society in order to manifest, to make real, what is already spiritually true.

Now in the field of psychology, there is plenty of evidence that when a person is born into and grows up in a context of cruelty, disrespect, abuse, oppression or neglect, they often deeply internalize the false belief that they have neither worth nor dignity.

A sense of worthlessness can get lodged so deep in there, so deep in the brain and psyche and guts that it feels absolutely true and real. We may look inside and feel a deep void or feel shame or disgust or self hatred. The idea that we are of infinite spiritual worth will be inconceivable, a ridiculous fantasy...

Most of us—well really all of us—grow up learning that we must meet certain criteria to be loved, embraced, included and valued. That's the nature of socialization and the formation of the superego, the plethora of internalized "shoulds" that keep us in line, keep us trying to be oh so good, keep us trying to please others, keep us doing and working and striving and efforting.

Because we've learn that we have to perform in certain ways or present in certain ways or hide aspects of ourselves in order to be accepted and loved. And when we are unable to meet that criterion, when we fail, or perceive ourselves to have failed, or perceive ourselves to been inadequate, or believe ourselves to be aberrant in some way, that can bring on feelings of shame and unworthiness.

What if my sermon really bombs. And how many times in giving past sermons did I realize later that I had failed to say something I really should have said, or I said something I really shouldn't have said, and in the aftermath I would feel a kind of emotional nausea for having missed the mark. But did it diminish my inherent worth? Apparently not.

So maybe I'm having a really bad hair day
or I was a jerk to my kids,
or my partner suggested, a little hurtfully, that I lose a few pounds,
or I got laid off from my job,
or I was taken advantage of...again!
or I had a stroke and now I need help with the simplest things,
or I was subjected to something that felt humiliating,
or because of my addiction I lost custody of my 3 year old baby boy,
or for reasons to numerous to explain I find myself homeless,
or I drove while drunk and caused someone's death.
or...

...you can fill in the blank from your own experiences or observations of the kaleidoscope of painful experiences that afflict human beings and cause us to deeply doubt our worth...

Sometimes there isn't any external trigger at all but rather a lifetime of super-achievement masking a gnawing, anxious inner feeling: Was that good enough? I'm good, right? I think that was good. No, I will never be good enough.

Does any of this lessen my sacred inherent worth? Does any of this diminish my spiritual identity as a being of worth and dignity?

No. None of this. Nothing can take that from me. Nothing can take that from you.

That was the essential and historical message of Universalism, the good news that the 18th and 19th century Universalists preached in a world obsessed with sin and the fear of a punishing God. The Universalists preached in that wilderness "Salvation is for every soul without exception! Salvation cannot be earned through good works, or faith or repentance because it is

already given freely.” They preached that because the soul is made from God’s Unconditional and Eternal Love, Eternal Love is the soul’s inherent nature and nothing can separate it—no matter how far it strays—nothing can separate it ultimately from that Love.

My contemporary version of this is: the Universe is a curved space made of love, and there’s no falling out of it!

I would like to share with you a dream I had years ago. Most of my dreams are flotsam and jetsam, or bizarre and convoluted adventures that make little sense to my waking mind, or take a lot of untangling.

But occasionally I have dream that is vivid and cohesive and clear. This was one such dream and I have come to accept it as a kind of teaching or transmission from...wherever those things come from.

I was running through narrow, labyrinthine streets of an old mediterranean city. It was a poorer area of the city, with laundry strung between the buildings. I was a young person, perhaps 11 years old, and I was searching for my friend, who I never met up with in the dream but I could see him in my minds eye, a boy of about my age, thin, brown skinned, with short black hair and soulful dark eyes. I was running through the canyoned streets and alleys looking for him, making my way toward his house.

I arrived at the door of his home, a humble abode located down a narrow lane that my friend shared with his father. I knocked on the rickety wooden door through which I could see into the kitchen. His father came to the door.

As the father came toward me, I saw two things at the same time: With my physical eyes, I saw that he was surly, unpleasant with a coarse and threatening demeanor, worn down by pain and hardship, that he was angry, sullen and bitter. I saw with my spiritual eyes that he was lit from within by a small sun, the light forming a golden orb-like aura around his head and upper body.

The light shone from within him and through him the way a bright flame might shine through a dirty glass lantern. The lantern was the shell of his human mind and body. The dirt on the lantern was the man’s limited and self-pitying conception of himself, his story about his life, his limitations, and his situation. The light was his true and eternal being, obscured by the film of unconsciousness but not in any way diminished by it.

He did not know what he was, a perfect holographic expression of the One Light, walking around with a bad back, calloused hands and a chip on his shoulder. But I could see the god-ness coming through this grumpy every-man as plain as day.

I did not see him as God embodied because he was a particular person, a special person. I saw him as God embodied because he was *a person*.

And I was moved to respond to the fact of it in the only way that felt appropriate. I put my hands together in silence and bowed in the gesture of Namaste (“the Divine within me bows to the Divine within you”).

And then I woke up.

All the great spiritual teachers of history tell us that if we go deep enough inside, if we break through the layers of personal conditioning, personal history and limiting ideas about who and what we are, and if we keep going, we eventually touch into something Transpersonal, a Self that is vastly larger and clearer than the personality: The Eternal, the Absolute, the Shining Void, the One Being, the Kingdom of God Within, the Divine Friend, Buddha Mind, Christ Consciousness, the I AM, the thing that we have so many names for including, for some people, God. The Whole of it is inside.

Touching into that is tasting, feeling, knowing one’s divine inheritance and thus one’s inherent worth and dignity. When you discover it in there, you’ll see it everywhere and in everyone.

But, even if we haven’t gotten anywhere close to finding it inside, or even if we can’t really believe any of this mystical stuff, we can still practice seeing it in ourselves and in each other. This is the practice of our first principle.

And so before we sing our closing hymn together, I’m going to ask you to stand and, if you are willing, to put your hands together in the Namaste gesture. And I’m going to ask you to turn and greet one another silently, to regard your neighbors, saying silently within your mind and heart “The inherent worth and dignity in me honors the inherent worth and dignity in you.”

May it be so.