

# Living Our First Principle: “The Inherent Worth and Dignity of Every Person”

Rev. Stephen A. Landale  
The Unitarian Universalist Church in Eugene  
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## CALL TO WORSHIP

We begin with the words of Annie Dillard:

*We are here to abet creation and to witness to it,  
to notice each other's beautiful face and complex nature  
so that creation need not play to an empty house.<sup>1</sup>*

This chalice we light as a beacon of light and love,  
as it has been since its inception during World War II –  
a symbol of the core of our faith,  
a radical hospitality that includes all in its embrace.

Come, let us worship together.

## MEDITATION

“Benediction”<sup>2</sup>  
by Mary J. Harrington,  
recently retired UU minister of Winchester, MA

*You, Love, we hear your voice  
a thousand times a day,  
and through the long nights –  
in the trill of the tiniest finch You call us,  
in the pungent flame of an orange,  
in the eyes of children whenever they notice  
one of the millions of beauties  
You have almost casually flung  
onto our path –  
in the scent of the ocean  
carried on a warm breeze;  
the brilliant moon...*

*In our dreams, in our silence, in our tears  
You visit and make your claim known.  
In the vitality and energy of community  
You summon us to integrity and tenderness.  
In our justice seeking  
it is your presence we witness to:  
no matter how terrible the circumstance*

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<sup>1</sup> #420 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, the most recent hymnal of the Unitarian Universalist Association

<sup>2</sup> shared by author at the 2005 fall retreat of the Ballou-Channing chapter of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers' Association.

*there You are  
close as breathing.*

*You call us forth  
to the vocation of courage,  
the profession of kindness,  
the ministry of praise,  
the service of awe.*

*You lure us  
to the far edge of desire,  
where we surrender to your longing  
and live, and live.*

## SERMON

### **Living Our First Principle Rev. Stephen A. Landale**

You have heard it said of Unitarian Universalists: getting us to agree with one another is like herding cats!

And yet at our 1984 General Assembly in Columbus, Ohio, after considerable debate, and several amendments from the floor, and this following years of committee meetings and sermons and coffee hour conversations, somehow the cats allowed themselves to be herded under a statement which came to be known as “The Principles and Purposes.” It now has a place in the bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association, as well as in our hymnals, immediately preceding the first hymn.

Unitarianism and Universalism, separate religions until the consolidation in 1961, long struggled with creedal statements... particularly Unitarians! As liberal religious people who cherish individual freedom of belief, as proud heretics who don’t want to be in the position of quashing dissent, we have been uncomfortable with anything like a creed.

However, many forces have for two hundred years brought us back to the table with pen and paper. We yearn for meaning, for clarity of purpose, for relevance. Our openness can become interpreted as “anything goes,” as if our congregations were places where people can say and do whatever they want, without any accountability to ideals or to relationships.

In fact, during the 1970s’s when the move towards the current Principles and Purposes began, this “anything goes” attitude led to irresponsible behavior on the part of many, including ministers. The Principles and Purposes were part of an effort to re-locate our center, our cohesion, our integrity.

Is it possible for a religious faith to respect individual freedom of belief while still raising up common values, goals, and even guidelines for behavior? Our Unitarian Universalist tradition proves that it is possible... perhaps even necessary. We must do our best at naming words we can stand by: words to guide us, words to provide for others and ourselves a measure for our actions.

Freedom of belief, yes; freedom from responsibility, no.

While we don't force one another into statements of belief, we do form and strive to live by statements about how we will be with one another and with the world. We don't issue creeds; we form and live covenants. The spiritual power of covenants is expressed beautifully in the last verse of the hymn we just sang:

*Since what we choose is what we are,  
and what we love we yet shall be,  
the goal may ever shine afar –  
the will to reach it makes us free.*

(from *Creative Love, Our Thanks We Give*, #289)

There is real power in choosing words to live by, and then standing by those words, allowing them to speak to us, guide us, call us back when we have gone astray. I have experienced this power with our Principles and Purposes, in particular with our First Principle:

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

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

In saying these words aloud, in classes for instance, I often observe people expressing with their bodies a feeling of relief. Shoulders drop a little, the face softens, sometimes with a smile. As human beings, we need our worth and dignity respected. I wonder if it's not a need as essential as food, shelter, and clothing. I wonder how much violence in the world has at its root a person whose worth and dignity was not upheld.

A religious body that places this need front and center is on to something. It says to us, "You have a right to expect that your worth and dignity will be respected in this community." And that's the truth. You can't be guaranteed your worth and dignity will be respected in every moment; we are, after all, human. But you have a right to expect your worth and dignity to be respected – and to ask for it, respectfully, when you believe it is not being respected. Affirming the worth and dignity of every person usually begins with oneself.

We also have a responsibility to affirm the dignity and worth of others. Even as we advocate for ourselves, we are called to respect the experience of others, particularly those with whom we are in conflict. As Martin Luther King, Jr., said, "A religion that ends with the individual, ends."<sup>3</sup> Our first Principle is just that: our first Principle, the way in, the opening to justice and compassion, to world community, to the interdependent web of which we are a part.

*It is no easy path. To affirm and promote something authentically, we have to know what it is. We have to move past the distance and the categories that separate us so we can be touched by real contact with distinct human personalities.*

I share with you now an experience of such a touching from a few years ago in Providence, Rhode Island, an expansion of my understanding of the plight of many Asian and other immigrants. For a few years I lived within walking distance of my church, in a diverse and lively neighborhood that was also home to sporadic violence. Two young teenagers were seriously injured, one killed, in separate drive-by shootings within three blocks of my apartment. I read in the news and heard talk in the neighborhood about young Asian gangs,

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<sup>3</sup> From "My Pilgrimage to Violence" by Martin Luther King, Jr., in Walter Wink's *Peace is the Way: Writings on Nonviolence from the Fellowship of Reconciliation*, p. 65.

responsible for the latest wave of violence. Teenagers, and even some pre-teens, with guns, shooting each other over the slightest insults. That is the stereotype I received from the news and from conversations among white people.

Then I attended one of the meetings in an “Anti-Empire” lecture-and-discussion series of the American Friends Service Committee. The focus was on Asian American issues. Sarath Suong, a Cambodian-American man in his early 20’s, shared parts of his life story: spending his first years in a Cambodian refugee camp in Thailand and then coming to the United States, where he still yearned to become a citizen, but could not even afford the \$800 in application fees.<sup>4</sup>

Sarath described the situation of an acquaintance that unfortunately is all too common: as a teenager he joined a street gang for security. He robbed a drug dealer, was arrested, and served several years in prison. When he was released, he was immediately detained by the INS and may be deported. Many young men committed crimes when they were about twenty years old but have remained clean since, holding down steady jobs and some raising families. But under laws passed under President Clinton and enforced more vigorously since 9/11, these people are being deported – taken away from their families and returned to a “homeland” that may never have been more than a refugee holding place for them, often in a culture hostile to their presence.

Sarath said that the Asian gangs formed during the 80s when Asian kids were picked on by kids of other ethnicities. As the Asian gangs grew, they eventually broke apart into Cambodian gangs, Laotian gangs, and so on. What started as self-defense – and I imagine even an attempt to preserve some sense of worth and dignity – has become something violent and destructive to the families and communities of the gangs’ members.

What I’m passing on to you from Sarath may not be news to you. Most gangs, I imagine, start in self-defense: defense of one’s physical self and of one’s dignity. Many of you are quite familiar as well with the serious problems created by recent changes in immigration policy and enforcement. What I hope to leave you with is not only the content of these stories but the process: going out there and meeting people different from ourselves. Sarath’s mature and compassionate presence, his stories, and his perspective made it easier for me to see the human dimension, and therefore the religious dimension, behind the stories that make it into the news.

When I hear the words “Asian gang” now, my sense of repulsion and fear is balanced by a sense of what it must be like to want to join such a gang. I am no less horrified or concerned about violence committed by gang members, but I am better able to be compassionate towards them. When I hear about immigrants being deported back to their “homeland”, I have a better picture of what that really means. As I sat in a South Providence community center listening to Sarath, I felt my respect for his worth and dignity enlarged – and I wanted to learn more.

*Truly affirming and promoting the inherent worth and dignity of all people requires that we learn from people who are different from us as a spiritual practice. We need to respect our limits and pace ourselves, surely, but I don’t see how we can be seriously committed to this First Principle without stretching ourselves. Ultimately what opens the doors of our hearts to change is compassion. It’s hard to feel compassion for a statistic. There is an aphorism to the effect, “The death of millions is a statistic while the death of one*

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<sup>4</sup> For more information about Sarath Suong and Southeast Asian immigrants in Providence, see <http://www.apiforce.org/SEADEP/RIdeportation.htm>

is a tragedy.” This aphorism is credited to Joseph Stalin. He used this insight to get away with mass murder. We can use the same insight to seek out, relentlessly, the human stories and human beings behind statistics. We must never hear of the slaughter of a thousand people as a single event – it is a thousand events, the killing of a unique and beautiful human being, repeated one thousand times. Each person has worth and dignity, and deserves our compassion. Each person is a gift of Life.

Living our first Principle is no mean task. Our religion, for all of its emphasis on freedom, also brings responsibilities. We are called to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of *every* person. This is not a call to release a generic, sunshiney, one-size-fits-all statement designed to make us feel good about ourselves. It’s not a call to go around saying we affirm everybody. We can’t affirm something we don’t understand.

*Our first Principle is a call to make the time and effort to get to know people in their particularities – especially those people from unfamiliar backgrounds.* A religious community covenanted to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person is gently yet continuously stretching itself – noticing who is missing, actively seeking out those whose lives seem foreign, building relationships with and spreading the stories of those whose worth and dignity are jeopardized – and doing our best to help them be restored to a place of worth and dignity.

This is who we say we are: people who stand up for the worth and dignity of all people; who actively promote justice, equity, and compassion in human relations; who defend the right of conscience and process of democracy; and who, out of acknowledgement of our interdependence with all existence, seek to build a world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

This is who we say we are. We fall short of this mission – every day. But let us hold close to our heart not only the freedoms but also the responsibilities of our faith. Let us experience that full, religious freedom that comes when we allow our own words to draw us forth into truly respectful relations with others.

Let us listen to the demands of love.

Amen.

#### CLOSING HYMN

*Though I May Speak with Bravest Fire, #34*

#### BENEDICTION

May we let inward love guide our every deed,  
a love that manifests as respect for the dignity and worth of self and others,  
even when affections do not arise.

Our faith is that simple, and that complex.

May we help one another on this path.

Blessed Be and Amen.