

How Inherent is Worth?

Christine Celata

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inherent: existing as a permanent quality or attribute.

Our first principle: We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

I've been profoundly puzzled by our first principle ever since I first heard it. I came to the UU church not knowing much about Unitarian Universalism. And I was greeted by the slogan "All are worthy; all are welcome". I imagine that this struck me the same way it strikes many people. For a few warm instants I felt like people in this church felt I was inherently worthy of respect. I, myself, was truly welcome. But I was just out of an abusive relationship where my partner was life-threatening to our baby and cruel to me. So did this church think he was worthy? Was he welcome? If he was welcome, I was out of there. For months there was something else rattling around in my head. I kept thinking that if the killer of Polly Klaas, the young girl who was kidnapped from her home, raped and murdered, was worthy and welcome, then something was amiss. And what are all these people worthy of anyway?

Then much later, probably like most of you, I heard that this inherent worth principle comes from the Universalist side of our heritage, a fact which I have confirmed via Universalist church websites. I should add, however, that you can find almost the identical wording of the principle in the 3rd Humanist Manifesto, so it may have come in from both streams of our heritage, or have gone from one to the other. But let's think about Universalism for now. Universalists believe that God is too kind and loving to condemn anyone to hell. So what we are universally worthy of is salvation, and that follows logically from the Universalist view of the nature of God. But this argument isn't convincing to many of us. Consider the book of Job. The book of Job might be the book of many people on earth right now, except that they are not as rich as Job. God makes a wager with Satan, and then visits upon Job every kind of pain and misery, the death of his family, the death even of his animals. At the end of the story God comes in a whirlwind, and you think that an explanation will be forthcoming. But what he says is only "Who are you to question me? Where were you when I created the world?" That doesn't sound like a kind and loving God to me. Maybe the Universalists are wrong. Or consider this. Isn't it possible that God created some bad people as sort of props, to add challenge and interest to life, and planned to throw them away at the end? Maybe if everyone has a soul, they don't. In this picture the Universalists are right about God, God is kind, no one goes to hell, but there are people wandering around who don't have inherent worth. And of course there is the fact we have a diversity of beliefs here. We are not all Universalists. For instance, I am an agnostic and some of you are also. If you don't believe in the God of the Universalists or something similar, then this whole argument about salvation and God doesn't mean anything.

And that is a problem. There are big stakes here. You don't just encounter the "inherent worth" term in our principles. If you go to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, or other human rights or animal rights documents you will find that those rights are based on "inherent worth". And our political discourse is full of

questions where, whether it is mentioned or not, the issue is whether people have inherent worth. Isn't this what political arguments are about when we argue about who deserves healthcare, or how humane prisons should be, or whether it is morally right to torture terrorists for information? We must be able to define arguments on inherent worth that are convincing to our selves and everyone else if we are to be able to support human rights.

Philosophers have taken a good look at inherent worth, trying to see if there is some basis for inherent worth and human rights. I have not, obviously, read all of the literature. But I read, for instance, a paper by Louis Pojman, a professor emeritus of philosophy at West Point, visiting scholar at Berkeley, NYU, and Cambridge University, among other places, and an ordained minister in the Reformed Church of America. His paper listed 10 different arguments for inherent worth that are given some credence today. Some of these are old arguments—from Kant and before—and some are modern. In his paper all were ripped to shreds for their lack of reasonable logic. What the author, and other authors I read, concluded was that if you are a religious person you have logical grounds for assuming inherent worth—that is, logical given your belief system. You might use as an argument the statement in Genesis that people are created in the image of God, or the belief that all people have a "divine spark" or a soul. I think of Hindus who greet each other with the word "namaste": the divine in me greets the divine in you. This is logical given your illogical belief in your religion. So you are fine, and you are done, and everyone has inherent worth for you. But these philosophers I was reading found that they were totally stuck for a logical secular argument for inherent worth, especially since there are walking counterexamples around—evildoers in modern life and in history. Some people don't obviously seem to have much inherent worth.

I will give you an example of one of the arguments that Pojman takes apart. It is a syllogism. It goes like this. I value myself because I have the possibility for positive and negative experiences. All other humans are similar to me in this way. Therefore I must value everyone. There are a couple of problems with this. Perhaps you don't find reasons to value yourself—you don't accept the first statement. Then everyone else is doomed also because they are like you. Or perhaps you value yourself because of what you do, not because you have a human body capable of experiences. Then others who can't or don't do those things you value don't qualify for inherent worth. And of course this is the way we usually judge people—on the basis of what they can, or do, do. Similarly, it was relatively easy for Pojman to demolish the other arguments. And he finally confessed himself stuck for a logical or convincing basis for inherent worth.

One argument that came up in many places as almost a fallback when all else failed was an argument that just being alive gives a person worth. Being alive means you are complex, hard to make, hard to replace, and therefore worth something, is the argument. But think of the evil-doers of history. Were they worthy of respect because they were alive? One needs a convincing argument why that would be so, and I think anatomy is not enough.

So let's leave the philosophers and try a more psychological approach. Here is a statement that probably all of you can agree with. Babies are good and engaging and have potential, and all of them have worth. (Though even this is controversial since there is research showing the children with certain genes have a 9 times higher chance of becoming bad news as adults. But when they are born that hasn't happened yet, so let's

proceed.) Babies are good, so perhaps we can believe that everyone starts out with some level of worth. Can we lose it later or is it permanent—is it "inherent"? I think it is interesting, and we should think about, just how much Sigmund Freud and his intellectual descendants influence your answer. Freud revolutionized our thinking about people, at least in the West, by telling us that their bad behavior had a cause and could be cured. So if I beat my child, I do it because I was beaten as a child and because I am an alcoholic, and I'm an alcoholic because I am genetically prone to alcoholism. So it is not my fault that I beat my child, and with treatment I can improve, repair the damage, and bring back to the surface my worthy self. This view replaced, or is in opposition to, a view of personal responsibility for our actions—the paradigm that we are what we do, that we are to blame for our bad actions. I don't know anyone who holds just one of these views. We instead oscillate back and forth between them, between blame and no-blame. So how do we decide which is right? How do we decide whether people always have some worth or redeeming good left in them? I don't believe that anyone knows. There is no science to tell us. Since we don't know, I conclude that it is a personal choice that each of us must make whether to assume there is good, or inherent worth still in there. Let me give you a few examples to think about as you decide. Eve Decker, a friend who is a wise woman and a serious committed Buddhist, told me that she believes that each of us has a raw and vulnerable human heart, and that for her that is each person's possibility for redemption and it is their inherent worth. I offer this for your consideration because I think that it is one good and thoughtful answer. But I will also give you a counter-story. Bill Schulz, a minister who was the head of the UUA for 8 years, later became the head of Amnesty International. While there he encountered many torturers and victims of torture. During his 12 years with Amnesty he says that he lost his belief in the inherent worth of all people. Perhaps those of us who still believe in permanent inherent worth have just been sheltered from events as real and heartless as those he saw.

Ultimately, what is my answer? I don't know how to know whether Bill Schulz is right and there is no inherent worth, nothing good, in some people, or whether something is there. And I don't make decisions if I don't know the answer. So I will probably never decide whether I believe in our first principle. But in thinking long and hard about this I have realized that I do know some things that are important. I know about the consequences that follow when you decide that some people do not have worth. We know where that leads. It leads to poor people without healthcare. Ask the libertarians and they will give you arguments why the poor aren't worthy. It leads to prisons where prisoners are attacked and raped, not just by other prisoners but also by guards. They are convinced that prisoners have no worth. It leads to Abu Ghraib and torture and extraordinary rendition. But why does it matter, if these are bad people without worth? It matters at the very least because there are innocent people sent to jail. And almost all poor people are good. And because having any connection to or responsibility for treating these people badly, no matter how evil they are, makes real changes in who we are. This is the most obvious lesson of Abu Graib. Treating bad people badly changes us. I learned this from personal experience in my relationship with my daughter's father. When he treated me badly it would have been easiest to act badly right back. But I learned very quickly that that is the way to lose yourself and your character. The battle is not to win, the battle is to hold onto the person you want to be. For these reasons, because of the effect on our society and our character and on innocent people of assuming that

some people are lacking inherent worth, I believe we must act as if the first principle is true, even if it is not. I would rewrite our first principle to what it should have been: "We covenant to treat every person as if they had inherent worth." After finally arriving at this conclusion I happened to find Bill Shultz's sermon on the internet, and I found that he came at the end to the same conclusion. His argument was that otherwise all human rights legislation would fall. His conclusion was that as UUs we need to "assign worth" to each person and "teach dignity".

So if you are in an argument about human rights, my advice is not to try to use the first principle as an argument. You can't prove it. You may not even be able to believe it. Talk rather about the damage to society and to self if we do not act as if it were true.

As a final comment, I have some information which might be useful to some of those of you who may have decided during the last 20 minutes that Vlad the Impaler, for instance, had no inherent worth. I was raised in the Catholic church, and spent most of my time there, from age 4 or so until adulthood, feeling guilty and feeling like I was hiding my thoughts because I didn't believe much of what I heard in church. When I realized during the past few months that I might not believe our first principle, I felt like it was happening again. Maybe I wasn't a good UU—I didn't even believe the first principle. So I nervously asked my minister in Pasadena what it means if a UU does not believe our first principle. He told me that the UU principles were adopted by the UUA, and each congregation gets to decide what to make of them. So as we may have hoped, at Neighborhood Church in Pasadena, at least, if I decide that you don't have any inherent worth I can still sit in church and not hide my doubter's nature.

So amen to that, and blessed be to whatever god, goddess or spirit may or may not exist out there.