

Getting Honest about Social Inequality and What It Has to Do with Us

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I'd like to start with some words from the noted theologian and ethicist Billy Joel: "Honesty, it's such a lonely word. Everyone is so untrue. Honesty is hardly ever heard and mostly what I need from you."

Billy Joel is, of course, singing about relationships but honesty can be hard to live out more generally, and I think it's particularly hard when it comes to social inequality and what it has to do with us individually. After all, we live in a highly individualistic society where we are trained to look out for number one rather than for everyone. Our individualism also means that it can be hard to see social groups or recognize their challenges. "I don't see race," we proclaim proudly. Or, "I don't think sexism is a problem anymore because there are women CEOs of large companies." Or, "What homophobia? Macklemore just won a Grammy for a song about same-sex relationships." And if we can't readily see that people fall into differently valued social groups because of their gender, race class, sexuality, ability, or other identities, social inequality won't make sense to us.

But there's even more. Our days are hard enough to get through without asking larger questions about social inequality. There's work or the search for work, our health, our families, our personal projects, getting through that long list that we make every morning, whether on paper or not. I call this the hassle factor. Our days are full of hassles and they are bad enough without having to ask hard questions about racism, sexism, homophobia, or class inequality, among others. And then, many of us are able to see inequality but only when and where it penalizes us. I can wax eloquent on how sexism and homophobia work because of my personal experiences with both of them, but I find it a challenge to remember that I have class privilege and white privilege. White working-class men often struggle to maintain their dignity in the face of a cultural and political system that deeply devalues working-class and poor people. The struggle to maintain dignity is a good thing, but it sometimes morphs into racism, sexism, and homophobia because we learn wrongly from society that dignity means being better than someone else.

Given all of these challenges, we can be forgiven for finding it hard to get honest about social inequality and our roles in it. But I believe deeply that there are reasons to do this work, and that it will help all sorts of people, not least ourselves, if we do it.

Now this will be a more academic sermon than I sometimes give. But you have a role in it as well. We will get to that a bit later. For now, let's see if I can make a compelling case about what social inequality has to do with us.

Unlike other religions, Unitarian Universalism does not have doctrines as such. But that doesn't mean we have no guidance about how to make sense of our lives or how to live them once we've made sense of them. For example, we affirm a set of principles that we are invited to take as a guide not just to our congregational life but to our lives more generally. And we encounter other wisdom in our hymns and writings and in the ritual life of our church. What do these sources of guidance tell us?

Let's start with the principles. We spend the most time on our first principle, the inherent worth and dignity of every person, but we take the other principles seriously as well. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large. The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

What do these principles have in common? How do they hang together? Here's an answer that I think helps us understand why getting honest about social inequality is a Unitarian Universalist invitation for us all. The first and seventh principles are about the inherent value of humanity and the larger universe around us. The second through sixth principles are a response to the idea that humanity has inherent dignity and worth. Each of these five middle principles represents a means to an end, namely the end of human flourishing or thriving or well-being, terms I will use interchangeably. So at least the first six principles are about human well-being in some sense, our own or that of others. Why should we care about human flourishing? Because all people have inherent dignity and worth and therefore are worthy of well-being. How do we go about creating a world where we and others can thrive? We seek to create justice, equity and compassion in human relations. We strive to accept one another and to encourage each other to grow spiritually within Unitarian Universalism. We seek truth and meaning in our lives, individually and collectively. We lift up the right of conscience because people cannot thrive when they cannot live out their own best values and we support the use of the democratic process because no one ought to have more political power than anyone else, given that all are equally worthy. Finally, we seek world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all because peace, liberty, and justice are the conditions under which as many people as possible are most likely to thrive.

What do I mean by thriving? One kind of answer can be found within UUism itself. Our hymn "For All that Is Our Life" claims that "all life is a gift which we are called to use to build the common good and make our own days glad." Building the common good – that's attending to the well-being of others. Making our own days glad is attending to our own flourishing. Or consider the language Rev. Beatrice used in commissioning the Pastoral Care Associates. As she anointed our hands she offered the following to each of us: "May you be a blessing. May you be blessed." But this is not merely a wish for a small group at High Plains. This is the wish of Unitarian Universalism at its best: that each of us be a blessing to others by helping them flourish, and that we be blessed in our own flourishing, for which both we and others are responsible.

Here's perhaps a more helpful definition: to thrive means to live a life in which we are encouraged to be and become our whole best selves, to fulfill our potential, to contribute effectively to society, and to enjoy the good things in life deeply.

You might say, so far, so good, but what does flourishing have to do with social inequality? The answer has to do with the fact that there are some conditions that need to be in place before we can thrive. First, we need access to basic survival resources or we won't even live, let alone

flourish. Basic resources are things like clean air, clean water, sufficient amounts of healthy food, shelter, and healthcare, though the list could be a lot longer. Second, we need to be able to avoid negative or dangerous experiences and situations to whatever extent this is possible. This includes safety, the ability to avoid violence and danger, as well as freedom from fear as a defining factor in our lives. Negative experiences include prejudice and discrimination or mistreatment from others, so we need to be free from mistreatment. It is also hard to thrive in a state of self-hatred and self-destruction, so we need to be able to love, trust, and believe in ourselves. Third, we need the self-determination to make choices about our own lives. And finally, undergirding these three, we need to be valued and respected by others, to be taken seriously, to be treated in short with the inherent dignity and worth that UUism affirms our having. Without social valuation, basic resources, freedom from danger and negative treatment, and self-determination, we have pretty much no chance of flourishing.

And that's where social inequality comes into the picture. Social inequality begins with being socially devalued because you belong to one group rather than another. Social inequality is the fact that, to paraphrase civil rights activist Ella Baker, the killing of Black men, Black mother's sons, is still not even close to as important as the killing of white men, white mother's sons. Social inequality is our society's willingness to hand poor-paying, dangerous, degrading, and menial labor off to poor people and people of color while providing inadequate healthcare to people without health insurance. Social inequality is environmental racism, the fact that poor BIPOC people so often live in dangerous environments that stunt their health and contribute to their dying young because the air is bad or there's lead in the walls or the food is already spoiled by the time it hits the supermarket or the drinking water is tainted. Social inequality is the more than one thousand federal benefits that Phoebe and I don't have because we can't be legally married in the state where we live, not to mention the ubiquitous playground cry of "that's so gay," meaning stupid or bad or awful or icky. Social inequality is the fact that far too many politicians don't want women to have control over our bodies and are delighted to punish women politically when we seek to be our own moral agents. Social inequality is the direct pipeline from school to prison for so many young BIPOC men because their misbehavior in school is treated as criminal when young white male misbehavior in school involves merely a trip to the principal if that.

And as these examples and literally hundreds of others demonstrate, once you belong to a socially devalued group, all those other preconditions of flourishing can't be guaranteed. Poor people of whatever race can't count on basic resources, not even a living situation without hidden toxins. Women, members of BIPOC communities, and LGBTQ+ people face situations of discrimination and violence regularly, as extensive research shows and as I could tell you personally. My plain old Amanda life may have a hassle factor consisting of getting the chores and work projects done and getting the car fixed when it breaks. But for members of devalued groups, there's the added hassle factor of having to ask whether every slight, every funny look, every not being taken seriously, every individual yelling from a car, is about one's group membership. And this hassle factor is frightening and exhausting. Self-determination is limited if you're poor because your options are simply more limited and because, as recent thoughtful journalism has shown, it is hugely time-consuming and actually quite expensive to live if you don't have certain basics in place like a car or a regular apartment or home. Self-determination is also much harder if politicians are trying to control your sexual health because you are female or

your voting access because you are from a BIPOC community or your right to adopt because you are a same-sex couple.

So, to sum up: social inequality leads to all sorts of people not being encouraged to be and become their whole best selves. Social inequality interferes with people's lives in ways that limits their potential, whether because they face discrimination or because they face violence. Social inequality makes it impossible for some people to contribute effectively to society because they don't have the basic resources or freedom necessary to bring their creativity or analytical skills or interpersonal abilities to bear. And social inequality makes it impossible for many people to enjoy the good things in life because they don't have access to decent food let alone money for a lovely dinner out, or because they face discrimination and violence, or because their self-determination is limited in one or more ways. Or all of the above. Put simply, social inequality makes it impossible for people to thrive, to live out the inherent dignity and worth that we claim they have.

And this is where the rubber meets the road for us. If the idea that all people have inherent dignity and worth is really guidance for us and not just pretty words, it ought to matter to us that some people are treated as if they had no dignity or were worth less than others or were even worthless, period. And if it matters to us that people face devaluation and social penalties because they happen to have been born female or queer or are poor or working class or a person of color or in another such category, what are we going to do about it? What can we do about it?

Many of us, of course, are already working for the flourishing of others as well as ourselves. But it's hard work and there's always something else to do, something else to learn. So I would like us to spend a few minutes today on an exercise of commitment. You will find a half-sheet of paper in your order of service and you should have found a pencil on your seat. As Joe plays beautiful meditative guitar music, I'm going to invite you to answer the questions on the paper and to hang on to the paper.

[The questions are: (1) Note one identity you have that is socially valued rather than devalued (e.g., white, able-bodied, male, heterosexual, wealthy). (2) Write down the parallel group identity that is devalued (people of color, disabled people, women, LGBTQ people, poor and working class people). (3) Write down one thing you could do or are already doing that contributes toward supporting members of the group you listed in question (2) being able to thrive. This could include further educating yourself about this type of inequality, donating money to an organization that works on relevant inequality issues, or joining such an organization, for example.]

Now that you've come up with at least one thing you could do or are already doing to promote the inherent worth and dignity of those who are not always valued as they should be, please consider keeping this piece of paper and making a commitment to follow through or to keep following through. No one here will ever know what you wrote down or what you did about it, least of all me. But you'll know. And whatever you do, however small, will make a difference. Even sitting here thinking about these hard matters is making a difference. I guarantee it. Once we get honest about social inequality and what it has to do with us, we have accepted an invitation, perhaps just in our minds and hearts, perhaps in our actions, and it is a great invitation

indeed, one that is all about taking UUism's good news about the inherent worth and dignity of humanity and putting it to work in an extremely practical way.

Valentine's Day falls in the coming week, and at first we might not see the connection between this particular holiday and the idea of flourishing. But once we look into the history of St. Valentine's Day we learn some pretty interesting things. The holiday began as a Christian liturgical celebration of several different saints named Valentinus. It turns out that at least one of the Saint Valentines was imprisoned for performing weddings for soldiers who were forbidden to marry, and for ministering to Christians who at the time were being persecuted by the Roman Empire. That sure sounds a lot like facilitating thriving to me, as does the story that Valentine healed the daughter of his jailer. Indeed, it is possible that the idea of designating oneself as someone's valentine comes from the actual Valentine's final letter to the daughter of his jailer which he signed "Your Valentine" as a farewell.

If this last story is true, it suggests something powerful about the idea of being someone else's valentine. Being your valentine doesn't just mean that I like you in that special way. What it really means is that I am committed to your flourishing. Phoebe may be my valentine in that we will go out to a special dinner this Friday and celebrate the 14th anniversary of our holy union in a month. But more than that, we are each other's valentine because we try to minister to each other and because we do our best to support each other's well-being.

So how do you feel about taking the world as your valentine? How do you feel about offering your ministering and healing touch to those pained by social inequality? How do you feel about resisting all those reasons to deny the existence or importance of inequality? If you find my approach here today convincing, and not everyone will, you might also find it somewhat frightening. It seems to indict and convict many of us of the crime of happening to be in the right social group. It might seem to invite defensiveness, guilt, or resistance. But just as I did not choose to find myself with same-sex attractions in a society that devalues people with those attractions, I did not choose to be born with light skin in a society that values those with lighter skin over those with darker skin. Guilt is tempting but unnecessary. Defensiveness and resistance are natural but don't help us get moving. There's a lot of human thriving that we can be out there supporting in a hundred different ways if we only will.

Billy Joel was right. Honesty is mostly what I need from you. From all of you. And honesty is mostly what the world needs from me. If we are honest about why human well-being matters, why inequality damages it, and how we can take a position on the side of flourishing for devalued groups, we will be better able to live out High Plains Church's mission of acting for social justice in a powerful and joyous way. So may we choose. Amen and blessed be.