

## Words with Baggage: Unpacking “Worthy”

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A few weeks ago, I was listening to KCME, our wonderful public classical music radio station, while I ran errands around town. When I turned on the radio, I caught the middle of a story about two artists who had graduated from Colorado College with Geology majors and then found their way to art. At one point in the story, they talked about being invited to exhibit some of their work at a particular art show and said they had been shocked to receive the invitation and that they could hardly believe they had been deemed worthy of this honor. They really used the phrase “deemed worthy.” And while the rest of the story was interesting, I could not stop thinking about that phrase.

“Deemed worthy.” Doesn’t that capture so much of what many of us don’t like about the word “worthy”? Why should we need to be “deemed” worthy? Aren’t we already worthy? And who gets to deem us worthy? Using what criteria? What does “worthy” even mean anyway?

We’ve considered a number of religious terms in our “Words with Baggage” series. Many of them have been pretty obvious: hell, sin, salvation, religion, worship, and so on. You might wonder how “worthy” gets into the mix. And I think the answer is that while a word such as “worship” is clearly and overtly a religious term, “worthy” is a little more surreptitious. It sounds like it could refer to anything, such as the artists deemed worthy to present their work in an exhibition. That doesn’t sound very religious. And yet worth is a concept that goes deep and that addresses what theologian Paul Tillich called “matters of ultimate concern.” That is, it is utterly important whether we are worthy or not, along with the nature of our worthiness. Does it come from someone or something else? Is it bestowed on us? Is it basic to our nature? Unitarian Universalism has an answer to these questions in its principle that its congregations affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Later I’ll consider the elements of this phrase as a way to see whether worth can be a productive term. But first we need to spend a little time on the ways that it is misused, sometimes so much that it is harmful.

First, there’s the way of thinking about worth that says we need to earn it, that worth is a matter of merit or desert. The geologists-turned artists didn’t know whether they were worthy to exhibit at an art show. Now maybe it’s fine to have standards of worth in certain circumstances; we wouldn’t want an art show filled with terrible art. But then we have to be clear that there are different ways of using the term and that when we say worth is earned, we are not talking about basic human worth. Indeed, perhaps “worth” is not really the best term for what the artists were describing on the radio show. Maybe “talent” would have been a better term, or maybe they should have just said that their art was worthy of exhibition rather than that they themselves as people were worthy or unworthy. For I think we can agree when we are talking about a symphony or a car that not all symphonies or cars are created equal. I’m quite sure you would rather hear one of Chopin’s preludes than one of mine, and that’s not false modesty. So let’s say we can use worth to compare things if we know what our measuring stick is. There doesn’t seem to be anything wrong with that as long as we are careful not to let the artist’s race, class, gender, or other social identities do the determining.

But we as a society don't stick to measuring things by their worth, and it is in the measurement of the worth of people that society causes harm. We see this frequently in religion, and especially when we are taught that some people aren't worthy because of something about them that they can't change, a good example of which is sexuality. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual people who grow up learning that they are abominations because of their sexual and romantic attractions are spiritually and psychologically damaged by these teachings and may eventually engage in self-destructive behaviors and even suicidality. Why? What makes otherwise healthy young people cause themselves harm or take their lives? It's simple: being told you're not worthy so often that you come to believe it. If you're not worthy, why take good care of yourself? Why even stay alive if killing yourself will end the torment? And it's not merely internal torment. Spiritually violent religious messages lead directly to bullying, which is also responsible for far too many suicides. If this is the meaning of worth, we should want nothing of it.

Christianity hasn't helped us very much here. If you've ever heard a person say, "We are not worthy, Lord" in a worship service or heard someone describe God as "worthy of the glory", you might see the problem. There is a long history of considering God as worthy and people as unworthy in some strands of Christianity, which is why there is also a long history of our Unitarian forebears rejecting this literally inhumane idea. A theology of human unworthiness ignores the many gifts we have, the many good things we do and create, our ability to heal ourselves and others, and indeed the stark reality that no one but human beings will repair the world. If we are not sufficiently worthy to live well, bring joy, create music, and solve social problems, why even try? In this way a theology of human unworthiness is basically a kind of religious homophobia writ large to all of humanity, and could theoretically be just as harmful. I probably won't kill myself if I think that God is everything and I am nothing, but I probably won't live as full and rich a life as I would if I acknowledged the great mixed bag of humanity that I am: capable of good and evil, of creativity and destruction, of love and fear. Once I see my capacity to bless the world and my capacity to curse it, once my agency in the world matters, once my worth is not at issue but how I choose to live is, I can actually make a real difference for good.

Quite apart from religion, society also judges people as more or less worthy based on the color of their skin, the size of their bank account, who they love, their gender, and all sorts of other matters that shouldn't matter. The example about sexuality above is only one of many identities that can lead to judgments of lesser worth. At the end of the day, what is social inequality about if not society judging some people as more worthy than others and people treating each other and themselves accordingly? This is probably clearest with the financial component of socioeconomic status; we literally ask about a very rich person, "What is he worth?" or "What is she worth?" In some sense, though we are technically talking about how much money the person has, we mean something else as well, don't we? We mean that there is human value in being rich. Our society sees rich people as more worthy and poor people as less so. We as a country are exceptionally good at blaming poor people for being poor, devaluing them, shaming them, and limiting their life chances. As a country we are willing to let poor people die of hunger, exposure, and ill health. Why? Because people in power in our country have deemed the poor socially unworthy, or better, worthless. All kinds of mistreatment follows. And in different ways this is equally true for people with other devalued identities, though now is not the time to spell out how that looks for different types of people.

Ultimately, whether we are considering religion, social inequality, or casual imputations of worth that come up in some other way, it seems to me that the danger in thinking about the worth of human beings is the idea that some or all of us are really not worthy, or not equally worthy, or not sufficiently worthy. The problem is not that the concept of worth exists, but that it can be used to devalue people, to ignore our needs, to keep us from flourishing or to support our attempts to keep other people from flourishing. Worth is a matter of ultimate concern not just in some abstract theological sense but because the quality of our lives and the lives of others is bound up with how we use the idea of worth.

And it is because of the deep importance of this idea that the First Principle of Unitarian Universalism is so important. We've repeated it so many times that it may roll off the tongue almost unthinkingly by now: we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Of course, we do. What decent human being doesn't? Only unrepentant racists and homophobes, we suppose. But we've all heard that familiarity can breed contempt, and if worth is a matter of ultimate concern, we would do well to reconsider our First Principle more closely. It is actually quite radical, in the sense that it goes to the very root of who we are as human beings and also to the root of how we should treat each other. So, let's break out these terms and spend a little time on each of them: dignity, worth, inherent, and "every person." Then we'll come back to the idea of affirming and promoting these ideas and ask what such affirmation and promotion demands of us.

Let's start with the idea of dignity even though it is the second of the two terms in the principle. It comes from the Latin word "dignitas" which means, simply, worthiness, and therefore can be treated as an equivalent term. It entered into English more directly from the French "dignité" and both terms suggest that, no matter how badly I am mangling their pronunciation, I still have certain innate rights as a human being. These include the right to be valued, to be respected, to be given a certain degree of status, and to be treated ethically. Philosophers have suggested various reasons that people should be treated with dignity, along with a number of reasons why it is wrong to treat people as though they did not have dignity. I've read some of these arguments and have not yet found one that doesn't rely heavily on an already-existing intuition about human value. In other words, reason alone does not seem to get us to human dignity; something more is needed. And our understanding of human dignity as innate seems, in the West at least, to have been clearly articulated only in the past few centuries. But we have it today, and it informs our thinking and certainly informs our First Principle.

It seems to me that there are two aspects of the idea of dignity that are most important to this reflection: first, that it is innate and second, that it demands positive treatment of all people. In a sense, our entire First Principle is captured in the word dignity: the idea of worth as equivalent to dignity, the idea that people ought to be treated well rather than poorly, the idea that this right is innate, or as we say it, inherent, and the idea that because it is inherent, the demands of dignity hold for all people, not just some. I'll say more about some of these points in a minute, but for now it seems to me that the UUA was wise in putting the word "dignity" in the principle given that many of us tend to have a felt sense of what it means whether or not we live it out very well.

The UUA preceded “dignity” with the term “worth.” Since it is functionally equivalent to the term “dignity,” we might wonder what it adds to the principle or why both terms were needed. Here’s my best guess: when we are not looking up definitions on Wikipedia but are just going by our gut, dignity and worth have slightly different feels to them. Dignity, as suggested above, moves rapidly to the matter of what we owe people in light of their dignity. It’s harder to say what dignity actually is, and easier to say what it means. Whereas if we say human beings have worth, it does mean we think they should be treated well but it also may mean we think human beings have potential, goodness, capacity, and other traits. This is just my interpretation, of course, and you might see the terms differently in relationship to each other. But one thing is clear: by using both terms in the First Principle, the UUA intended to come down hard on human value and its demands. The authors of the principles preferred redundancy to any doubt about their intent or their beliefs.

We see the same redundancy in the term “inherent.” The First Principle says that every person has inherent worth and dignity. We’ve already seen that dignity assumes innateness, and that worth is functionally equivalent to dignity. So why add the term “inherent”? What about the innateness or inherency of worth and dignity need to be spelled out?

Let me try to answer this question with a surprising analogy. Some UUs wonder why we should say “Black lives matter” rather than just saying “all lives matter” since we clearly affirm that all lives matter. Aren’t Black lives just a subset of all lives? Many of us these days answer this question by pointing to the fact that, in our society there’s plenty of evidence that Black lives actually don’t matter very much to white people as a whole. Saying “all lives matter” is not an inaccurate description of our faith affirmation; we do believe that all lives matter and should be treated as such. But since Black lives so clearly are not treated as mattering, we need to focus on them and get people to pay attention to the discrepancy between our faith stance that all lives matter and the reality that black lives don’t matter far too often.

In the same way, saying that all people have inherent worth and dignity is a faith stance that acknowledges that many people are not treated as well as they should be but that current reality should not be the last word on this topic. Let’s say we saw that a particular person was being treated badly because they were poor or Black or female or gay or a religious minority. If we don’t believe that worth and dignity are inherent, we might be tempted to determine that this individual does not have worth and dignity since he or she is not being treated in a worthy or dignified way. Or let’s say we see someone deep in the pain of self-hatred and self-destruction, both of which can be extremely ugly to see from the outside. If this individual does not believe he or she has worth and dignity, why should we believe it? The notion of innateness, of inherency, answers the question for both of these examples: it is an act of faith on our part that all people have inherent worth and dignity even when they are treating themselves badly or others are treating them badly. Worth and dignity do not depend on how society interacts with someone, specifically because worth and dignity are inherent. They are the last word, even when they do not appear to be in place.

There’s another good reason to specify the inherency of dignity and worth. When it comes to human beings, dignity and worth have nothing whatsoever to do with merit. We don’t earn our dignity and worth, and someone successful in the eyes of society does not have more dignity or

worth than someone society deems a loser. Now most of us say this but struggle to act on it consistently. We are well-trained from childhood to treat socially defined winners better than socially defined losers, and indeed to treat socially defined losers quite badly. But inherency says that one does not earn or accomplish one's worth. A baby is as worthy as the president of the United States of America. A disabled person is as worthy as a basketball star. Someone who chooses to live a more limited life for cultural or religious reasons is as worthy as someone who has visited all the continents and has the passport to prove it. Inherency says that as much as we may value status and authority and fancy experiences and access to power there is something deeper and more important than them, something that ultimately makes us human and makes all of us human, and that something is precisely our inherent worth and dignity.

If our inherent dignity and worth is what makes us human, or put differently, if being human means that we have inherent worth and dignity, then all people have inherent worth and dignity and all people ought to be treated ethically. We may do this terribly in reality, but that does not deny the ethical demand on us to do it well. We are much more inclined to treat people we like or love well, or to treat people well who have power over us, or to treat people well with whom we agree. But both the inherency of worth and the specific language of the First Principle say that every person should be treated with respect, fairness, and value. Including the people we dislike or loathe, the people we think are destroying the country, the people we know only marginally, and the people over whom we have power and who we can therefore treat badly with impunity.

So, what does it mean to treat all people ethically? I'm sure whole forests have been sacrificed to this question but here are two quick, down and dirty answers that are not original but that might help us think further. One answer is negative, one positive.

First, treating all people ethically does not mean treating all behaviors as equivalent. A rapist-murderer has the same inherent dignity and worth as someone who frequently works to help poor people find resources but their actions are not ethically equivalent. Rape and murder are morally wrong, to say the least. Since the man who rapes and murders has inherent worth and dignity his heinous behavior does not strip him of that worth and dignity but his actions do demand a response from society so that he will not cause further harm. Putting such a person in prison is not a denial of his inherent worth and dignity; it is a reasonable response to his behavior, provided that the prison is humanely run. Similarly, the person who works on behalf of the poor has not increased his inherent worth and dignity by doing so but he has behaved ethically and should have his behavior lifted up as a model for others. Thus, we need to be careful to differentiate between inherent worth and dignity on the one hand and behavior that can span the ethical continuum on the other.

Second, one way of defining ethical treatment of other people is to say that we treat someone ethically when we help them to flourish or to have a good life. Treating everyone ethically means acknowledging that all people should get to have a good life regardless of their skin color, political persuasion, gender, the country of their birth, and so on. It's not that people don't have differences that we should respect. It's that those differences shouldn't lead to one type of person suffering and another type of person flourishing. And this is why UUs are overwhelmingly in support of political and social actions that prioritize justice. On the most immediate level, we

ought not treat people badly in face-to-face interactions, since poor treatment doesn't help people flourish. But more broadly, we should be part of solutions to the social problems that lead to so much suffering.

Which leads, finally, to the language in the principles that we have not yet considered. Before the specific principles are listed, we say that we affirm and promote the language of the principles. The UUA has been very careful to include language on its website that says the principles are strong values and moral guides rather than dogma or doctrine, but I suspect that is a distinction without a difference. Even the most politically conservative UUs with whom I've spoken have found ways to translate the language of the principles to fit their personal values, which means UUs in general are not willing to openly reject the principles. So, if we agree, as somewhere between most and all UUs do, to affirm and promote the First Principle, what does that demand of us regarding the inherent worth and dignity of every person?

It seems to me that we can find the answer back in the definition of dignity provided above. Dignity implies that all people have the right to be valued, to be respected, to be given a certain degree of status, and to be treated ethically. Perhaps affirming the inherent worth and dignity of every person is no more, and no less, than this: the First Principle demands of us that we treat all people in these ways. Now of course this answer merely opens up many more questions: what does it mean in day-to-day life to value an individual, or for that matter a social group? How do you know when you are being respected or respecting someone else? What degree of status is appropriate for everyone regardless of their other traits or group memberships, and how is it to be granted? What does inherent status look like compared with the conferred status of wealth or political power? Does ethical treatment look the same for everyone or does it look different depending on one's individual or group specifics? Clearly, today is not the day to address these questions but it does suggest what our ethical, and perhaps our political, work is as Unitarian Universalists: to figure out, and then live out, the First Principle in its complexity and its moral demands.

Ultimately, though, what I hope most of all is that today's reflection on the First Principle has provided a way of thinking about the term "worth" that removes the problematic layers that have been heaped on it, thus enabling it to be the source of joy and even of good news that it can be for people of liberal religious bent. If the way to make the world a better place is to acknowledge and respond to the worth inside each of us, which is not earned but is innate, then we would do well to reclaim the term "worth" and put it to work for us as we go about bringing healing and hope to those around us. May we take up this task joyfully and energetically. Amen and blessed be.