

"To Love & Live in the World for the World's Own Sake"
 Reading & sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno
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From *Being Liberal in an Illiberal Age* By Jack Mendelsohn

The worst this world can visit on human spirit and flesh is the emptying of life, the sickening sense of nothingness. And in a world throbbing with technology and technique, with hard sell, hard play, and furious events, people spin until there is no inner life left in them. They become clothes without bodies and bodies without souls; they become not persons but masks & routines Ministry is the restoration of an interior quality to life, a substance and a sustenance to the human interior.

To minister – and here the word embraces laity and clergy alike – is to be called out of our pretensions, poses, and protective facades and into the great, open, windy world, where we are at least alive, even if tremblingly so, and where the chances of confirming the sanctities of our blundering hearts are endless.

... If we truly love the world we will have to immerse ourselves in its sorrows, taste its bitter cups, and open our hearts to its most painful conflicts and tensions. Then and only then can our lives speak truth to the world in the spirit of love.

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If you're doing our faith justice, it's hard to be a Unitarian Universalist. There are several reasons for this difficulty but this morning we're going to consider just one of them – the one that says that we covenant to promote and affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

We said it together as we lit our chalice this morning. And I bet you felt a spark of pride in saying so.

We mean it.

Pretty much.

Most of the time.

And ... there's the rub.

In spirit, we *do* mean it, even if and when the covenant is aspirational. Perhaps more now than ever we need to engage with that principle as aspirational. Maybe we need to put that principle on the refrigerator or tape it to the laptop. Maybe we write it across a blank piece of paper every morning when we begin our day. That one principle. Just a few words gently floating like a summer cloud from this pristine sheet of paper to our hardened hearts.

Look, it is a difficult covenant to honor on any given day but now on some days it feels like an impossible dream let alone our spiritual covenant. These are the jagged edged days when, bewildered, we ponder the question: Who is my neighbor?

How do we honor the inherent worth and dignity of every person in these times when the world feels so upside down and backwards?

Let's look at this ethical and spiritual charge from an orientation that is not quite right side up. That is, for today let's not argue the terrorist's inherent worth. The racists' dignity. Let's not break our heads trying to justify the soul of they who would unleash any number of horrors on the innocent.

Let's go at this differently. I invite you to consider the following theological precept.

When corrupted by any number of deadly sins, it is not unheard of that that a mind, heart, and soul will choose evil – for a *human being* attached to said mind, heart and soul – to choose evil. Tragically, voices of one's better angels are drowned in the cacophony, of a “world throbbing with technology and technique, with hard sell, hard play, and furious events”, as the wise man said. And because evil is chosen, the world suffers. I imagine that evildoers suffer too, but my greater compassion flows toward those who without equal power suffer mightily for the damaging choices made by the more powerful – inherent worth and dignity or no.

This jagged time comes to Unitarian Universalists – and all liberal religionists - as a reckoning.

Liberal religion has forever been critiqued for going soft on the existence of evil and sin, critiqued for our “sunny theology” in the face of gruesome brutality. But Unitarian Universalism's current deep dive into the poison ivy that is white supremacy – our reckoning with white supremacy's roots and persistence and our increasing humility in coming to terms with our own

complicity may just move our theology to a deeper maturity needed to more bluntly face these confounding questions of good and evil. It seems that we are more willing to take seriously Unitarian Universalism as a religion that demands our theological contemplation. The movement within our movement, the movement for the Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism, may be one of the driving forces. For this, let us give thanks and praise.

And now, let's just leave that there. Let's consider our first principle from a different perspective. An interior perspective. Yours and mine.

What is the interior work that we must do to meet the world every day with an open heart and by doing so, meeting others with that same openness? This open-heartedness is not to be confused with a la-dee-da, no accountability, I'm-okay-you're-okay skip through life. No.

I quote the provocative T-shirt that asks: If you were arrested for being a Unitarian Universalist, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

Would a jury of your peers find evidence that while you honor the inherent worth and dignity of every person so too do you accept that evil must be faced down with steely, determined, fierce truth, love, and beauty?

The world is, in fact, visiting the worst upon so many – perhaps you are one of who is suffering “an emptying of life. A sickening sense of nothingness”.

Mendelsohn calls our attention to ministry itself as “the restoration of an interior quality to life, a substance and sustenance to the human interior.” Right about now and forever more, we need good ministry – ministry to others and to ourselves. We are being called into “the great, open, windy world”, so says Mendelsohn, “where we are at least alive, even if tremblingly so, and where the chances of confirming the sanctities of our blundering hearts are endless.”

Isn't that gorgeous? *And a relief?* Isn't it a relief that no one is asking you or expecting you to be a glittery princess in this effort? You are simply being asked to honor the fact that you are at least alive, and that others are at least alive, too, and that we are at the very least responsible for each other. All of which is in service to our covenant to uphold our first principle.

We've got interior work to do.

How might we reach down to grab hold of our deepest commitments to ourselves, to each other and to the world that we love? How do we tend to our interior lives so that we may best live up to our covenants?

Our faith demands exactly this: that you keep your heart open no matter how hard you have just a moment ago slammed the door shut. Slowly turn from that still vibrating shut door to see that you are not trapped in a dungeon of rage and despair. Out of blood and commitment our ancestors have built the room where you find yourself so that you may claim a faith that is for you, for all of us, a clean, well-lighted place. There you will find an open window through which flows a cool breeze upon which is an invitation to your ever loving, sometimes shrinking and over heated heart. Walk toward that window, Beloveds, and breathe. Breathe in the peace your interior life so desperately needs. And then get back out there into your life. Into the world.

You are needed.
And you are being held accountable.
Who is holding you accountable, you ask?

Actually, there's a list.

One, you are accountable to yourself. You must hold yourself accountable to the vision you hold of yourself on your best day, that day when with all of your strength you manage to wrestle your pesky, cranky, judgey instincts into the cat carrier.

Do what you must to make that commitment to yourself. I got a tattoo, for example. [INSERT PHOTO / SLIDE HERE] A dramatic choice for a 56 year-old lady, but these times call for bold choices. Figure out how you will hold yourself accountable and do it.

Now, look around. Guess what. You're accountable to this congregation of Souls, all of whom are rooting for you. And I know that you are rooting for them because we all know that together, we are rooting for a just and beautiful world *for everyone*.

And there is this: you are accountable to the covenant you make to the mystery that is bigger than sweet, pint-sized you.

Further, when you speak these words, “I covenant to promote and affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” You are accountable to your faith. You are accountable to a proud Unitarian Universalist history of going against the grain.

And this is the truth, Beloveds:

We cannot allow hate or rage or helplessness to corrupt our interior lives. That is the definition of sin: a break in relationship with God or if you prefer, with the spark of divinity that we acknowledge within each of us or if you prefer breaking relationship with your true and best self. I spoke earlier about what happens when souls are deeply and consistently corrupted and none of us are above such corruption. We are bound by covenant to push back against the common violence of our age with all the beauty, love, and truth we can muster.

Said the wise man:

If we truly love the world we will have to immerse ourselves in its sorrows, taste its bitter cups, and open our hearts to its most painful conflicts and tensions. Then and only then can our lives speak truth to the world in the spirit of love.

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Let's say it together: If we truly love the world we will have to immerse ourselves in its sorrows, taste its bitter cups, and open our hearts to its most painful conflicts and tensions. Then and only then can our lives speak truth to the world in the spirit of love.

Then and only then can we truly, deeply and authentically turn to our neighbors, and quite simply and say, “Peace be with you this morning, good neighbor.” Then and only then will we say it without suspicion and with holy hospitality much like a band of adolescent boys who every Sunday morning seek out their minister, extending their generous and maturing hands to be shook and assured.

“Peace be with you this good morning.”

And yes, it is pulling up at the red light behind the car with the “Make America Great Again” bumper sticker and recognizing the person you

actually aspire to be. Which means maybe you say absolutely nothing to yourself or out loud. Nothing.

The ability to live up to our covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person is to be called out of our pretensions, poses, and protective facades and into the great, open, windy world, where we are at least alive, even if tremblingly so, and where the chances of confirming the sanctities of our blundering hearts are endless.

Start with sanctity of your own blundering hearts, Dear Souls. Then and only then will we be able to engage and enact our first principle.

Start there.

Blessed be. Amen.