

"The Inherent Worth & Dignity as Spiritual Practice"  
Reading & sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno  
September 14, 2014

A meditation by Thich Nhat Hanh

Let us be at peace with our bodies and our minds. Let us return to ourselves and become wholly ourselves.

Let us be aware of the source of being, common to us all and to all living things.

Evoking the presence of the Great Compassion, let us fill our hearts with our own compassion towards ourselves and towards all living beings.

Let us pray that we ourselves cease to be the cause of suffering to each other.

With humility, with awareness of the existence of life, and of the sufferings that are going on around us, let us practice the establishment of peace in our hearts and on earth.

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We are so proud of it, our first principle. It's the one that trips easily off our tongues. The one we remember ... unlike the five that follow that we frequently muddle up. While we may be pretty fluent in the 7<sup>th</sup> principle, the first one is our first language.

*We affirm and promote: the inherent worth and dignity of every person.*

A cornerstone Universalist belief is and has always been the ultimate worth of every human being. It was the theology that made our forebears staunch abolitionists in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, long before the movement to abolish slavery had traction. You'll also remember that Universalist theology is one of universal salvation – that all are saved by a loving God. This particular theology took some bends and twists through the generations – some argued for future punishment, usually until the soul returned to a state of grace; others named two natures: carnal and spiritual and that with death, carnal nature was destroyed.

These are the type of controversies that are interesting to theology and history students and geeks but make everybody else's eye cross. In sum, Universalists believed – and Unitarian Universalists still hold - that all people are worthy and salvation is assured.

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And yet ...

I need not convince any of you that these are troubled times. We are being tried and tested. Our *faith* is being tried and tested on a daily basis. Ours is not a "Sunday world view". We gather on Sundays in part to help us sustain our deepest values on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. And then we return again.

But what happens when fresh off of Sunday you come across the video of an American journalist being beheaded on Monday?

What becomes of your world view when on Tuesday the woman is being dragged out of the elevator, after being knocked-out by her fiancé?

And then it's Wednesday and so-called journalists are sitting around making jokes about said abuse. "Maybe she should take the stairs from now on!" "He needs to remember that there are cameras in elevators."

What kind of a beating does your Sunday world view take when on Thursday you're reminded of that day 13 years ago when terrorists unleashed a storm of hatred?

On Friday you read about the Missouri state legislature enacting two laws: one that will impose a 72-hour waiting period on a woman seeking an abortion even if that woman has been raped or is the victim of incest. The other bill that passed into law in the great state of MO will ban municipalities from preventing people with *concealed*-carry permits from openly carrying guns.

I imagine that by Saturday, you decide to leave the paper neatly folded. You shield your heart and pass right on by the computer. The only radio programs you listen to are the ones that will make you laugh.

And then it's Sunday. It's today and here you are. You have made your way to this place that reminds you that we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

How in the shattered world do you not only make sense of that but also how do you maintain your Sunday world view throughout all the days of your week?

Practice. Spiritual practice. Spiritual discipline.

It's so not easy. Especially in times such as these. But in times such as these it's up to us to save the world. Nothing less. How do we do that?

We start with a practice that has at its cornerstone a covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

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So we're going to start at the extreme end of the continuum and work our way back to the personal.

Let's look at Jim Wallis' example. Wallis is an evangelical Christian known for his liberal activism on behalf of causes that include poverty, peace, and environmentalism. He has been arrested for acts of civil disobedience over 20 times. In other words, the guy's got cred.

This past Thursday, at a 9/11 commemoration at CT College, my colleague there, Claudia Highbaugh, shared Jim Wallis' words. I share them with you now.

*Prayer is a necessity. ... To do violence to others, you must make them enemies. Prayer, on the other hand, makes enemies into friends. When we have brought our enemies into our hearts in prayer, it becomes most difficult to maintain the hostility necessary for violence. In bringing them close to us, prayer serves to protect our enemies. Thus prayer undermines the propaganda and policies of governments designed to make us hate and fear our enemies. By softening our hearts toward our adversaries, prayer can become treasonous. Fervent prayer for our enemies is a great obstacle to war and the feelings that lead to it.*

Treasonous, indeed. In fact, as Claudia was reading there was a moment when I thought: "We may be fired for this."

Because how did you feel when I shared those words?

*Prayer, on the other hand, makes enemies into friends. When we have brought our enemies into our hearts in prayer, it becomes most difficult to maintain the hostility necessary for violence. In bringing them close to us, prayer serves to protect our enemies.*

Are you interested in protecting our enemies? Are you willing to engage in a spiritual practice that would have you for just a moment act as if you were interested in protecting our enemies?

Are you interested in their inherent worth and dignity?

It's scary. In general, we are not socialized to love our enemies. No. We live in an emotional and political climate that is hot and muggy. It is as though we are all trapped on a subway without air conditioning in the dog days of summer. We are irritated and anxious and desperately seeking relief ironically through angry, knee jerk outbursts. Toxic letters to the editor. Anonymous online comments. The sound track is the incendiary talk show host stirring the pot. One of whom cautions: "If your church is promoting Jeremiah Wright-style social justice, if you see it, you should run from it." (Glenn Beck – March 24, 2010)

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And indeed, our president did run from it. It may have been a practical, tactical decision when running for president the first time. He did indeed run from a congregation that was deeply committed to social justice. He has other spiritual leaders supporting him – one of whom is Jim Wallis. Glenn Beck isn't very happy about that, you can be sure.

But I am. I'm hoping President Obama read the same passage Claudia shared on Thursday morning. Before President Obama makes any decisions about unleashing yet more violence into the world, I long to imagine the Nobel peace prize winner taking up the spiritual practice of praying for our real or perceived enemies. To actually make the tepid, obligatory "God bless America" mean something that will do something to actually bless America as well as bless our global neighbors.

I long to imagine the president taking seriously the words of another Nobel peace prize winner. The one who said: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

And again:

*Prayer is a necessity. ... To do violence to others, you must make them enemies. Prayer, on the other hand, makes enemies into friends. When we have brought our enemies into our hearts in prayer, it becomes most difficult to maintain the hostility necessary for violence.*

It may seem impossible to him to entertain let alone engage a spiritual practice that would have him pray for his enemies. But it's not impossible for you and me. So, let's leave the leader of the free world out of this for now. How do YOU feel about a spiritual practice that will lead you through the valley ... that may provoke a deeply held fear ... that at its core insists upon the inherent worth and dignity of every person?

I'm a little scared of praying for the people who shake my foundation. But I don't want to operate from that place because I cannot operate from that place and change the world. I really do want to extend my Sunday world view to all of those who would seek to infect my joy in life and my faith in humanity with the rotten stench of fear and hatred. And the cornerstone of my world view – because it must be – is the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

So I'm going to give it a try. I'm going to start praying for all of them. The terrorists and the war mongers. The misogynists and the wife beaters. Those who see no irony in denying a woman an abortion but would gladly allow citizens to openly carry guns. At first I fully expect that I will feel like I'm having a spiritual stroke. But then, I'm going to trust that over time, it will become as the wise man encouraged, an "awareness of the existence of life, and of the

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sufferings that are going on around us. [And it will be a] practice [to establish] ... peace in [my heart] and on earth."

And I hope that you will do the same.

I hope that you will hold in your heart, hold in the light, light a candle, offer up powerful mojo, send healing energy ... whatever your spiritual practice may be, I hope that you will try to extend that practice to those whose inherent worth and dignity is difficult for you to discern. Let's see how that feels for us all. Let's see what changes for us.

*Affirming and promoting the inherent worth and dignity of each person as spiritual practice.*

So there's the extreme end of the continuum. Let's swing back and concentrate on the average Joe-on-the-street with whom we cross paths on an average day. What about our first principle as spiritual practice then?

Interestingly enough, the last time I preached on our first principle, I also relied on Thich Nhat Hanh, the Zen Buddhist Master. I hadn't remembered that but it is no wonder for this revered teacher has for his lifetime embodied deep spiritual practice. He walks in meditation. He smiles in meditation. He lives simply.

What if you looked at every Soul who crossed your path on any given day and blessed them for their inherent worth and dignity with your smile? With a kind word. With your patience. By somehow indicating that you see them. We all just want to be seen, after all.

Which brings me to this story...

Earlier this summer I was driving down Broad Street. I was having not such a great day and was feeling a bit beside myself. As I approached a red light something on the sidewalk caught my eye. It was a woman holding a sign. In big letters the sign said, "I see you." I was intrigued. "I see you", I thought. That's all we long for: to be seen. To be acknowledged for our inherent worth and dignity.

Who is this woman, I wondered. What moved her to do this simple yet powerful thing? I wanted to know her! I wanted to know.

Unfortunately, the story gets a little bizarre here. For as I got closer for a closer look, I saw that the woman was not a woman at all because the woman was not human. The woman was a mannequin. A *motorized* mannequin waving the "I See You" sign back and forth.

Instead of driving off an existential cliff, let's think about the first part of the story: With a simple little sign that said "I see you" I was lifted up. In the space of just a few seconds, my lousy-ish day lifted. A few seconds was enough time to realize the power of being seen. We can extend this powerful lift to others by faithfully embodying our first principle. Every day. As a practice.

Start small. Let's start together. Let's read Thich Nhat Hhan's words together.  
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Return again. Return again. Return to the home of your soul. Filling your heart with compassion toward yourself and to all living things. Recognizing the inherent worth and dignity of each person on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday.

Because we have a world to save.

Salaam. Shalom.

Amen & Blessed be.