

WHEN WE FAIL
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“to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.”
- The First Principle of Unitarian Universalism

Unitarian Universalism affirms the inherent worth and dignity of every person. This fundamental belief in the value of the individual has long held a central place in liberal religion and finds a modern expression in our faith’s 1st principle. Such a conviction comes with specific meaning, serving to counter another ancient religious principle – that of original sin.

Original sin teaches us that each of us is born in a state of sinfulness, fallen and unclean. Some interpret this as the simple imperfection of humanity, while others decry an inherent wickedness in us all. As both Unitarian and Universalism were forming in America, the utter iniquity of humanity was preached widely. Jonathan Edwards’ famous sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, serves as a prime example. He wrote:

“The God that holds you over the pit of Hell, much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath towards you burns like a fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times so abominable in his eyes as the most hateful and venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince: and yet it is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment.”

In many ways, Unitarianism and Universalism gained a strong foothold in American society because of their response to this horrible theology.

William Ellery Channing, considered the father of Unitarianism, delivered a

powerful sermon entitled, “Likeness to God.” It was delivered at the ordination of a Rev. F.A. Farley, where Channing advised:

Let the minister... hold fast... [to] a faith in the greatness of the human soul---that faith which looks beneath... the vices of the sensual and the selfish, and discerns in the depths of the soul a divine principle, a ray of the Infinite Light, which may yet break forth and shine as the sun... Let him strive to awaken in men [and women] a consciousness of the heavenly treasure within them.

John Murray, the founder of American Universalism, also strongly spoke out against beliefs in human depravity. He said:

Go out into the highways and byways of America, your new country. Give the people, blanketed with a decaying Calvinism, something of your new vision. You may have but a small light, uncover it, let it shine, use it to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. Give them not hell but hope and courage. Do not push them deeper into their theological despair, but preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.

Affirming the inherent worth of each and every person serves as our great response to one of the most damaging theologies ever spoken... As Unitarian Universalists and religious liberals, it is something we can proud of and continue to speak loudly when the times call for it, as they sadly so often do.

Yet, sometimes, I wonder if we misunderstand the fullness of our first principle. In a very success-driven society, I think we sometimes see it as affirming not so much our unconditional worthiness but a complete goodness in ourselves. This affirming of our fundamental goodness has its value and I certainly believe in the divine potential of everyone, but such emphases can also lead us to miss the most essential implication of our inherent worth – that we need *not* be good to be loved.

To know this truth is to be healed... it is to embrace wholeness over perfection, to honor ourselves not as we might be but as we are. I think interpreting our inherent worth as our inherent goodness can lead us to be very fearful about owning up to our own mistakes, failures and even at times cruelty. Without a deep acknowledgement of our capacity for, to use the Christian term, sin, we lack a useful theology of accountability, forgiveness, and even love. And yes, despite our inherent worth, despite our basic goodness, we – each and every one of us – do sin. The power of our first principle is not that we do not sin, but that even in our utter failings, we are worthy of love.

As a young man of 24, just entering seminary, I suffered deeply from an inability to embrace my failings. On a core level, I resisted acknowledging all the wounds and weaknesses in myself, feeling the incredible need to be good, to be right, to be perfect in order to be loved. I dated a woman briefly that year who suddenly ended our relationship, treating me afterwards with enormous hate and anger, while refusing to talk with me about it. I grieved our breakup in its time, but I couldn't shake the pain of being hated. It practically drove me mad, as I couldn't stand anyone hating me. I discovered later that she had been sexually abused as a child, and our relationship triggered those childhood feelings. But even knowing that, I blamed myself. As hard as it was, the experience, for me, began the very painful and ultimately liberating path of accepting myself not as I want to be, but as I am, even when I fail, even when I am not liked.

Later on that year, I took a career assessment test as part of my requirements for becoming a minister. As part of the two-day test, I met with a psychologist, who asked me to share with her what I thought my weaknesses were. Not having a good sense of

them or even an awareness of any major ones, I had trouble sharing anything of substance. Based on our 15-minute interview, the psychologist decided I would never be able to handle the parish ministry. Now in my 10th year of ministry, I think she's been proven wrong, and sometimes, I have this slight vengeful feeling to let her know somehow. But, much more importantly, the experience was another opportunity to face my fears of failure and most especially, my sense of having to be good to be loved. Those two experiences helped me begin the process of uncovering my failures and weaknesses and embracing them with love.

Despite my challenges with many aspects of conservative Christianity, I believe the Christian story, perhaps better than any religious tradition, addresses our human capacity for failure. As the most obvious example, Jesus was a failure. He was supposed to be the Messiah and usher in a new kingdom of peace for the Jewish people, yet instead, he died on the cross – mission not accomplished. All kinds of beliefs have evolved to turn Jesus' death into a victory, most notably, the belief that he died for our sins... that he was the necessary sacrifice that could atone for our original sin. But I find Jesus so much more powerful as a failure... the man who lived and loved, struggled and hurt, strived, succeeded and failed. Jesus, as an image of God, knows us in his humanness, knows us in his weakness, knows us in his failure.

While in seminary, I had a professor, Rosemary Chinicci, who was also a Catholic nun. She told me something fascinating – she believed the resurrection came too soon... that people did not have enough time to sit in the loss, to be present to the failure. I think that's a powerful insight.

When approaching the pain that comes with failure, we tend to find ways to pass over the experience quickly, to not allow ourselves to be present and actually feel what

we're feeling. We get busy. We criticize ourselves. We criticize others. We dive into some self-improvement project or another. We try to see "the positive side."

In my mind, one of the great tragedies following the attacks of September 11th was that we did not allow ourselves enough time to grieve. We struck out in vengeance, avoided our fear, and ultimately failed again in our bad choices.

When we fail, any response we make that does not invite in our simple experience of failure removes us from the wholeness of who we are. In so doing, we reject that part of ourselves that does not know success, alienating ourselves from a very real part of our humanity, damaging ourselves by withholding the love that we all deserve.

It is certainly not in our interest to take failures and use them as a means to measure our worth, even though many of us do this. Failure is our ticket to being fully human. Even the greatest among us have known immeasurable failure. No one escapes it. Yet, I think it is also not in our immediate interest to take our failures and turn them into something positive – the "lemons to lemonade" approach. While this has essential value over the long haul, to attempt to turn our failures too soon can be another way of avoiding the pain of failure and thus avoiding the healing that comes when we compassionately offer our presence to our hurt.

Twelve step programs have shown us another way – a healing way. Countless people have been transformed by openly admitting to their failures in the presence of loving community. This is why Rosemary Chinicci's idea of more time before the resurrection makes such sense. When we fail, we need to allow ourselves the time to do nothing with that failure, but feel it – to simply feel the pain, experience the hurt. In so doing, we allow ourselves to remain open and true to ourselves. For this is ultimately what love is all about... compassion means to feel with. When we feel our failures, when

we allow ourselves to be present to them, we know compassion. We know love.

And this is the gift, the greatest gift of our first principle – the inherent worth and dignity of every person. You need not be good to be loved. And I believe this extraordinary gift bequeathed to us by our ancestors compels us to continue to offer this love to each other and our larger world – beginning with ourselves. Let us give up the façade of perfection, set aside the pretense of success, and enter into the humility of our true nature. We succeed and we fail... in the midst of both, let us show love.