

The Supreme Worth of Every Human Personality

Rev. David E. Bumbaugh

[The Unitarian Church in Summit NJ USA](#)

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"We avow our faith in the supreme worth of every human personality." It is a sentence we repeat with great frequency in this church--a line which spills off the tongue and sounds appropriate enough that few of us find any great challenge in the assertion those words express.

"We avow our faith in the supreme worth of every human personality." There is a kind of pious certainty about this statement, which tends to lull us into complacency about what it is we are really saying, and engenders a curious insensitivity toward the radical nature of the claim contained in that affirmation.

There are among us, however, people for whom this affirmation is not simple, or pious, or certain. People who recognize this statement of faith as profoundly difficult and challenging and problematic. Over the years of my ministry with you, I have had a number of conversations with men and women of the congregation concerning this particular statement in the affirmation we used in this morning's service. "Do we really believe," they frequently ask, "in the *supreme* worth of *every* human being?" Sometimes they question the anthropocentric notion that human life is the supreme value in this universe, given what we know about the age, the extent, the variety and the probably future of the universe. More frequently, they begin with a recitation of human cruelty and depravity and wonder that any thinking people can affirm the worth of such individuals. "How," I am often asked, "can you affirm the supreme worth of a Hitler, a Stalin, or to bring the matter closer home, a hoodlum who kidnaps a young mother from a shopping center parking lot and then leaves her lifeless body in a ditch? Is it not possible that some people, by their actions, have removed themselves beyond the embrace of our common concern and care? How can we affirm the supreme worth of every human personality?"

These are not frivolous questions. They are on a par with the questions many of us addressed to the orthodox creeds of the churches in which we grew up. Failure to find a satisfactory response to our questions caused many of us to abandon the religious communities of our childhood. The fact that our affirmation is not a creed, is not imposed as a condition of membership or fellowship, does not bind anyone's conscience, and is subject to debate and correction and change does not free us from the obligation to wrestle with the honest questions that affirmation generates. Therefore, I would like to spend this morning reflecting aloud with you on the statement that "we avow our faith in the supreme worth of every human personality," not only because I believe the questions it raises are important, but also because I suspect that its very difficulty indicates how

central that affirmation has been to the tradition which this church represents.

Let me begin by confessing that I do not know what that statement means. I am quite certain that it, like most such statements, means different things at different times and under different circumstances, and that inevitably it means different things to different people. I do know that the affirmation we used this morning is an adaptation of a statement adopted by the Universalist Church of America at its national meeting in Washington, D.C., in 1935. Clearly, this particular statement was not a mindless reflection of the optimism of the late nineteenth century. The women and men who framed this statement and voted to accept it had witnessed the horror of the First World War, had seen the debacle of the great depression, and were watching the growing power of fascism in Europe. They were not foolishly naive people, inexperienced in regard to the depravity of human nature. Yet, in 1935, they avowed their faith "in the supreme worth of every human personality." What that statement meant to those who adopted it, I do not know. I do know that from the moment I first encountered it, in 1957, it has challenged me constantly. This morning, I can only tell you what it has come to mean to me over the decades of repeating it, and invite you to explore your own hearts and minds to decide what, if anything it means to you and whether it is an affirmation you wish to make. I would only add that in keeping with our historic concern for freedom of conscience, we do not assume that there will be full agreement on any statement of faith. In keeping with our historic practice of openness and dialogue, we only assume careful, critical consideration of important questions.

This, we have said, is a difficult affirmation on several points. What does it mean to talk about the supreme worth of human personality in the kind of universe which science has revealed to us over the past century? We are assured by the scientific establishment that human beings are late comers in this universe. For long eons there was no life, anywhere--only stars burning fiercely in silent, empty space. For most of the history of the universe, it would have been impossible for an outside observer to predict that the goal of the universe would be to produce life. When life finally did evolve on this planet--the only life of which we have any knowledge--it did so slowly and gradually. For long eons life was difficult to distinguish from non-life. For long eons, life seemed destined to be little more than single-celled phenomena. As it began to evolve into more complex forms, it was not at all clear that the goal of the experiment was to produce homo sapiens. Indeed, it is still not clear whether human beings are the goal of the life process, or only one more side-trip down a dead-end developmental corridor. In a universe so vast we cannot imagine its dimensions, in a universe so ancient we cannot understand its age, on a planet so rich in life forms, what does it mean beyond incredible arrogance to affirm the supreme worth of human personality?

For me, this statement says nothing about the supremacy of human beings in the universal scheme of things. I do not hear in these words a claim that the Universe came into being just so that human beings would have a place to live, or that human beings are more important than any other form of life. Rather, I hear some important things about the relation of human beings to the process by which meaning is encountered, purpose is discovered and worth is affirmed in our experience. As I repeat this statement, I find

myself constantly reminded that concepts of worth, meaning, purpose are distinctively human contributions to the process which is the universe. We are the creatures who continually worry ourselves to discover some meaning, not only in our own lives, but in the long and complex history of the universe itself. We are the creatures who constantly assume hidden purposes in the random processes of existence. We are the creatures who regularly compare what is with what was and what might be, and thus establish categories of worth and value. We are the creatures who cannot be content to live in the eternal present, but who seek to enlarge our existence by living simultaneously in the past and future as well as present. What I hear in this affirmation of faith is an important reminder that worth--all those processes by which we add value to our experiences--is a human creation. Human beings are the source of all values in this universe. Therefore, we must be especially careful, lest we elevate the things we value above the human beings who give them their value. People are of greater worth than the institutions, the structures, the systems, the artifacts they have created.

This affirmation begins with a call to avoid the ever-present temptation to idolatry, the ever-present temptation to elevate the values we have created above human individuals, the generators of value and worth. This affirmation serves as a reminder that whatever God may be, we are doomed to see God primarily through human eyes, in human constructs, in the faces of human beings. Therefore, it behooves us to treat human beings as the embodiment of the holy, as the source of value, as the incarnation of supreme worth.

"We avow our faith in the supreme worth of every human personality?" If, indeed, the human community is the locus of worth and value in this universe as we know it, what are we to make of those individual human beings throughout history, and in every community, who seem to delight in depravity and violence and cruelty, making a mockery of those values, those purposes, those meanings we have so painfully developed throughout human history? Do we really mean *EVERY* human personality? Do we intend to include the murderers, the torturers, the villains, the tyrants within the circle of our love and compassion? Do they, too, reflect the holy, the sacred, the supreme worth? This is the more difficult question. It is a question which is reflected in a variety of ways throughout our society. It is the question which presents itself in the debate over capital punishment. It is the question which presents itself in the effort to deal with violent crime. It is the question which presents itself in the demand to make our institutions accessible to those who are physically, emotionally, mentally disabled. Are all people of worth? Do all people incarnate the sacred? Or do only some people? Is it possible for individuals to behave in such a manner that they remove themselves from the caring and concern of the community?

Throughout most of human history, the answer has been quite clear. There are people who are outside the boundaries of our love. Sometimes they have been placed beyond the pale because of ideas they have championed. Heretics who question the conventional values have had little sympathy from the majority. Sometimes they have been placed beyond the pale because of illness or deformity. Anomalies who make us feel uncomfortable or insecure or threatened have had little sympathy from the majority.

Sometimes they have been placed beyond the pale because of what they have done. Not only murderers and thieves and villains, but also the unconventional who are seen as a threat to the safety and security of others have received little sympathy from the rest of society. Throughout most of human history, love and concern and care have been reserved for those who conform to the majority vision of what human beings should be, and who find a niche for themselves within that vision.

The uniqueness of the Universalist half of our tradition consists in the radical demand that we broaden the circle of love and concern and compassion to include all people, every human personality. Early Universalists did not dispute the obvious fact that human beings are capable of foul and heinous crimes. Early Universalists did not doubt that some human beings represent an unacceptable threat to other people and to the community. Early Universalists did not question the need to protect individuals and society from the violent and destructive behavior of those who, for whatever reason, could not or would not live at peace with their fellows. However, Universalism refused to concede that anything another human being might do could suffice to release us from a bond of obligation toward and concern for that individual. Universalists understood that the human personality is a complex thing, created out of the constant, inescapable interaction between the strengths and weaknesses of the individual, and the demands and the failures of the community in which that individual lives. Because that is so, it is not possible to know what the precise degree of responsibility is for any given course of behavior. Universalists were unwilling assume society was at fault, thus releasing the individual from responsibility for his behavior. Neither were they willing to release society from responsibility for the behavior of the individual. They saw the individual and the community as one interacting system, and seemed to know instinctively that by ejecting the individual from the circle of love and concern, society was refusing to face its own complicity in the acts of violence and hatred and depravity committed upon it.

What is more, Universalism affirmed a deep and abiding faith in the possibility of regeneration and renewal. It might be that some individuals are simply beyond correction, are beyond reformation, are beyond redemption. But, said the Universalists, we cannot ever know that to be true in any given case. In their own language, they argued that the love of God is irresistible, can reach into the most hardened heart, can renew and regenerate virtue where it seems totally dead. Therefore, argued Universalists, we cannot afford to assume that any one, no matter what he has done, is beyond reach, is forever beyond the circle of our love and compassion and concern. It was for this reason that Universalists throughout our history have opposed the death penalty and sought to make prisons places of reformation rather than punishment--not because they did not recognize the horror which criminals perpetrate upon the human community--not because they did not care about past victims and potential victims--not because they did not believe individuals must be held responsible for their acts--but because they knew that society must not be allowed to execute its failures and thus fail to confront its own shortcomings inadequacies and complicity, and because they knew no one can ever be certain that any individual is beyond redemption, beyond change.

"We avow our faith in the supreme worth of every human personality." When I repeat

those words, I hear this long history of our movement echoing down the corridors of my mind--the insistence upon our need to open the circle of love to include not only those who are like us, but also those who are not like us, to include not only those who embrace our values, but also those who flaunt their contempt of our values, to include not only those with whom we are comfortable, but those who threaten us and anger us and frighten us. I hear the long history of men and women who took seriously the injunctions of the New Testament to "love your enemies....do good to those who spitefully use you....turn the other cheek....go the second mile," and who sought to construct a religious philosophy which would embody those ideals, not theoretically but in the conduct of daily life. When I repeat the words of that affirmation, I know that I am close to the heart of our tradition--the assumptions and practices and convictions which set Universalism apart from other religious communities, and which make our message unique and important today. In many ways, it is this sentence which encapsulates the special vision and the distinguishing faith of Universalism.

It is small wonder, then, that many of us should have difficulty with this affirmation. If it were self-evidently true, it would probably be of relatively little significance in the religious life of individuals or society. This statement stands in constant judgment upon the way our society is constructed and the way most of us live our lives. It serves to challenge the manner in which society continues to banish whole classes of people from the circle of our concern, encouraging us to think of human beings as allies or enemies, as friends or strangers, as citizens or aliens, law-abiding or criminal, responsible or irresponsible--each set of categories suggesting that one group deserves our concern and the other does not. It serves to challenge the manner in which we build walls around ourselves--walls which strengthen fear and resentment and distrust of those who are different from us, who live by other values and respond to other imperatives. This statement calls us, as individuals and as a society, to remember that human beings are the source of values, and that we dare not cherish values above human beings who give birth to values. This statement calls us to remember that we are all one family and that nothing any individual may do can remove him or her from the circle of our loving concern. While we need not approve of any given behavior, and while we dare not pretend that violence and murder are insignificant, neither can we pull our skirts away from the evil that people do and pretend that we have no part in it and no obligation to those who have betrayed their best nature.

In many ways, the affirmation we used in this morning's service is my favorite of all the attempts to express what Unitarian Universalism is all about, in part because it most clearly voices the Universalist contribution to our tradition and to religious thought in this country, and in part because it forever raises profound and disturbing questions--questions about the society in which we live, and how I live my life within that society. It is not an easy affirmation to make. It raises difficult questions. It demands that I examine my own life and my own values and my own faith. I distrust affirmations which raise no questions. Precisely because it is difficult and disturbing, I cherish it above all other efforts to define our faith. "We avow our faith in the supreme worth of every human personality!" That may well be the most radical religious affirmation ever made. Clearly, we have yet to embrace or live out its fullest implications.