

RESPECTFUL RELATIONSHIPS
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Living together while practicing our principles requires quite a juggling of values, feelings, ideas, egos, and intentions. Mutual respect is a pretty important ingredient in successfully engage in relationships. Let's explore what that might look like.

Opening Words ~ Margaret A. Keip

As surely as we belong to the universe
we belong together.
We join here to transcend the isolated self,
To reconnect,
To know ourselves to be at home,
Here on earth, under the stars,
Linked with each other

Come now, let us join together, in this special place and time...whoever we are...wanderer/worshipper, seeker/connector, visitor/friend...knowing that as we open our hearts, we create a place of belonging for all.

A Time for All Ages **Whoever You Are** ~ Mem Fox

(In poetic prose, this book reminds us the whoever we are, wherever we are, wherever we are in the whole world, joys are the same and love is the same.)

Responsive Reading #521 (SLT) ~ Eusebius

May I be no one's enemy and may I be the friend of that which is eternal and abides.

__May I wish for every person's happiness and envy none.

May I never rejoice in the ill fortune of one who has wronged me.

__May I, to the extent of my power, give needful help to all who are in want.

May I never fail a friend.

__May I respect myself.

May I always keep tame that which rages within me.

__May I accustom myself to be gentle and never be angry with others because of circumstances.

May I know good people and follow in their footsteps.

Reflection **Respectful Relationships**

When I was asked to speak here, I was told that your theme for November is respect, but I was also told that you didn't expect for me to write a new sermon. It surprised me to find that for none of the approx. 300 sermons I've delivered in my ministerial career, was the central focus that of respect. Shocking really; given the centrality of respect to our tradition. Even though it's not explicitly stated in our first three principle...the

inherent worth and dignity of every person; the practice of justice, equity and compassion in human relations; and acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth...respect is clearly required. Hence, the beauty of monthly themes, which call us to territory into which we have not yet ventured. It's about time I talk about respect.

I'm going to begin by telling an old story from the Hebrew Bible. It's found in the book of Kings,¹ and it tells of two young women who lived in the same house and who both had had an infant son. One of the women claimed that the other, after accidentally smothering her own son while sleeping, had exchanged the two children to make it appear that the living child was hers. Both women claimed to be the mother of the living child, and said that the dead son belonged to the other.

And so they went to King Solomon for a judgment, who, after some deliberation, called for a sword to be brought to him. He declared that the live son must be split in two, each woman receiving half of the child. As the story is told, upon hearing this terrible verdict, one woman cried out, "Please, My Lord, give her the live child – do not kill him!" The other exclaimed, "It shall be neither mine nor yours – divide it!" Solomon instantly gave the live baby to the first woman, realizing that a true mother's instincts were to protect her child.

Pretty hard to respect the woman who would have a baby cut in two, isn't it? I can't see myself ever understanding her.

Some of you may know that I'm a dual citizen, and so I didn't just 'watch' the recent election in the US; it was an election for the president of a country I call my own. You can guess, I suppose, who I voted for, and it's pretty darn difficult for me to have respect for the current president-elect.

But did any of you see the coverage of President Obama's meeting with Mr. Trump shortly after the election? The mainstream press portrayed a cordial visit, and in the short video shot immediately following, the two men displayed unexpected social decorum and grace. I tried to put myself in the shoes of my friends, "Barack and Michelle," as they welcomed the Trumps into the White House; but truth be told, I didn't have the stomach for it. I don't have any respect for the president-elect, so could I honour his human dignity were we to meet in person?

Maybe these two examples are too tough. Maybe they are red herrings, not unlike the question about whether or not Hitler would be welcomed and accepted within a UU congregation. Can we be kind and compassionate to a liar who would have a baby cut in two? Can we be gracious with a person whose hateful values seem to threaten all that is good? On a daily basis, can we just show one another a little respect?

What is respect, really? Perhaps what's confusing is that there are multiple definitions. By one definition, respect for someone is an expression of admiration. By another, to

¹ I Kings 3: 16-28

respect, for example the environment, is to avoid harming it. Another meaning states that respect is synonymous with agreeing to abide by a rule. But when we speak of respect in the context of our principles and our relationships, I think what we're talking about is yet another definition...that of due regard for the feelings, wishes, rights, or traditions of others.

Due regard. Due regard by virtue of another's worth and dignity. Due regard because of another's inalienable rights. Due regard in spite of our own discomfort with unfamiliar cultures and traditions. Due regard grounded in humility and a recognition that none of us holds all of the truth. Due regard for human life itself.

It is through this lens...due regard for the other...that I want to explore respect today.

What if we were to show due regard for the lying woman in the Solomon story? In the words of Rev. Kathleen McTigue, here's the challenge:

"Let the rightful mother have her baby, gloriously alive and intact, but then... be wise in heart as well as head, so that when [we] look at the other woman [we see] more than just a liar caught in the act. [To be a people capable of respecting the inherent worth and dignity of all people, we need to be able] to see a mother out of her mind with grief and loss. [We need to] let her presence] remind [us] of all [our] own lies, [our] own unbearable losses, and so bring [us] off [our] thrones and down on [our] knees next to her where she huddles. [We will need to discover the courage that enables us to] ...speak some word of kindness [to her], then lift her up and walk with her, back to the cold room where her deepest fear and sorrow lies wrapped in a still bundle on the bed. [And then to]...Stay with her there, quietly, [and help her] bear this most precious of losses..."²

Respect is deeply connected to simply being kind. Not that it is always so simple.

If you would excuse another US reference...it was just Thanksgiving there this past week, and because of the recent election, there has been a lot of 'chatter' about how to have respectful conversations at the family dinner table. One organization, Showing Up for Racial Justice³, even created a placemat which has at the center some simple tips, including:

1. Listen mindfully before formulating a thoughtful response
2. Breathe
3. Ask questions when people express strong opinions
4. Speak from a place of mutual interest

Well, if any of you imagining this table conversation have more conservative family members...maybe some of them even Trump-supporters, as I do...perhaps you are beginning to feel your hackles rising, your blood beginning to warm up. Respectful

² McTigue, Kathleen. From Shine and Shadow; Meditations. Skinner House (Boston, MA) (c) 2011. pg.9

³ http://www.showingupforracialjustice.org/surj_holiday_placemat_for_racial_justice

conversation is much, much harder than it appears. It takes skill to navigate controversial dialogue with civility, let alone respect. Let's explore why.

Due to recent neurological exploration and discoveries, we are learning fascinating things about how our brains work. (And I admit that the following is gleaned from reading someone else's sermon rather than the source material itself⁴.) Cognitive dissonance, which arises when we encounter contradictory beliefs, is difficult for us. The more committed we are to our own beliefs, the harder it is to be open to others or to doubt our own position.

Our brains crave certainty so much that our minds are often made up before we know we've made them up. The 'feeling of knowing' is more powerful than being right, or even being reasonable...it is an emotional response, fed by dopamine...we get an actual rush from believing that we are right. Certainty should be a warning sign that we're having an emotional reaction (not that there's anything wrong with emotions...it's just important to recognize what is emotional and what is intellectual.) So, certainty is dangerously close to righteousness, and righteousness...well, it's pretty hard to be respectful and self-righteous at the same time.

But, just as it is possible to pay due regard without showing agreement or admiration, it is possible to listen to what others have to say while still holding onto our own beliefs. That is, if we leave a little room for doubt. Robert Burton, in his book *On Being Certain*, says, "It is in the leap from 99.99999 percent likely to 100 percent guaranteed that we give up tolerance for conflicting opinions, and provide the basis for the fundamentalist's claim to pure and certain knowledge."⁵

Yes, even we liberals can be fundamentalists...so certain that we are right...that we have the answers...that our religion is the only enlightened one. Obviously, respect is much easier...perhaps even a given...when we share values, when we have regard for another's actions, when we feel we have things in common. Respect is much more difficult across differences, when we're having trouble seeing someone's inherent worth, when we don't agree with what they stand for, or what they have done.

But what does our faith call on us to do? Next week (on December 5 at 7pm...you're all invited) we are showing the film "Defying the Nazis: Sharp's War" in Peterborough...a new documentary about a Unitarian couple who worked to get Jewish refugees out of Europe during the Holocaust. We share space with Beth Israel Synagogue, and we're co-hosting this showing with them, honouring that this story touches both congregations. In the preparations for it, I was asked what it is about our Universalist history that would call the Sharps to endanger themselves for others.

In the most simple of terms, universalism calls us to respect, show due regard for, each and every life. Let me offer a couple of significant quotes. The first is from Rev.

⁴ Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof. "Gray Matters: Your Brain On Uncertainty" July 19, 2015
http://www.uuspokane.org/images/2015_07_19_Gray_Matters.pdf

⁵ Ibid. Cited as: Burton, Robert, *On Being Certain: Believing You Are Right Even When You're Not*, St. Martin's Press, New York, NY, 2008, p. 157.

Clarence Skinner, who was the pre-eminent social prophet of the Universalist Church during the first half of the last century. This comes from his book, *A Religion for Greatness*, and is slightly adapted.⁶

[Universalism] gets down to the roots out of which prejudice grows. It digs into the soil of [our] selfishness, superstitions, and distortions.... [We] must enlarge the borders of [our] consciousness to include the human race. We must think, feel, and act in universal terms, and thus see how petty and sinful are the partialisms of our lesser selves. We must welcome differences because life in a varied world is richer than life in uniformity. We must recognize the rightful place of color, shape, and history in a syncretic culture. If we "see life steadily and see it whole," we can appreciate all the parts. The part becomes misunderstood only when we see it without relationships, as an end in itself. One race is no more necessary than one kind of tree or one kind of horse. Each has its own genius and each may contribute to a life that is "rounded, divine, complete."

And this comes from *Bringing God Home: A Traveler's Guide* by the late Rev. Forrest Church:⁷

Universalism is an exacting gospel. Taken seriously, no theology is more challenging—morally, spiritually, or intellectually: to love your enemy as yourself; to see your tears in another's eyes; to respect and even embrace otherness, rather than merely to tolerate or, even worse, dismiss it. None of this comes naturally to us. We are weaned on the rational presumption that if two people disagree, only one can be right. This works better in mathematics than it does in theology; Universalism reminds us of that. Yet even to approximate the Universalist ideal remains devilishly difficult in actual practice.

I know, I've packed a lot in today...perhaps trying to combine all the sermons I should have given over the years about respect. Let me try to summarize in a few short sentences.

1. Universalism... imbedded in our modern-day UU principles...calls us to love our enemies and to embrace otherness.
2. We affirm difference because it supports a rich life in a varied world, and yet respect, to offer due regard, is most difficult to practice when confronted with difference.
3. Certainty that we are right makes showing respect difficult if not impossible.
4. Simply being kind goes a long way toward being respectful.

May we be a people capable of respecting the inherent worth and dignity of all people, allowing the presence of otherness to bring us "down off [our] thrones and down on

⁶ <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/183458.shtml>

⁷ <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/universalism-theology-the-21st-century>

[our] knees." May we speak words of kindness, lifting one another up and walking together, as we co-create the world of which we dream.

So be it.

Closing Words ~ *Rebbe Nachman of Breslov*

Let the good in me
connect with the good in others
until all the world
is transformed through
the compelling power
of love.

Go in peace, respecting all life.