

Dignity vs Free Expression

November 9, 2014

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org

Rev. Paul Beckel

Do not take offence, even when it is offered. —Zen Tradition

To criticize is not to reject. This point must be emphasized, for it is the dividing line between the free mind and fanaticism. It is the doorway to a universal religion that rigorously seeks the truth, and yet is also inclusive and welcoming to all. —Rev. Ken Patton

A STORY ~ on finding dignity by letting it go ~

Two monks walking from one town to the next through woods came to a river. They'd been there before and knew where the stepping stones were, but now it was raining hard and the river had risen dramatically. Even if they could guess where the stones were, they knew they'd be up to their waists in cold water. But they had to forge ahead, and just as they were about to step into the water they heard a quiet sobbing nearby in the tall grass. A little girl was there with her head in her hands. What's wrong, they asked, and she said that her home was on the other side, she'd crossed early that morning before the rain, and now knew she was too small to get through the high water. Well, the first monk said, we're very sorry but our religious vows demand that we never touch a female body. She looked at the second monk who simply smiled and picked her up in his arms, stepped into the water, carried her across the river, and set her down on the other side. The little girl jumped onto the path and raced home.

When the first monk caught up he reprimanded his brother: I can't believe you would do such a thing. That's just awful. It is an affront to our dignity! They walked along for another hour and the first monk brought it up again: you should not have done that, you broke your vow. But the second monk said nothing. After traveling still another hour the first monk couldn't contain himself any more: we should stop and eat, but I can't eat with you, you make me sick how could you do such a thing? And finally the second monk broke his silence, saying, brother: it is true that we have vowed not to go near women, but I left the girl back by the river. You are the one who is still carrying her.

REFLECTIONS

Tom Magliozzi died this week—he of the big laugh from Car Talk. What a dope he was! Laughing at people's car troubles, making relentless snide comments about his wife and his brother, and in general bringing NPR and his fair city down a few notches in class. Click and Clack were so *undignified* that every time they mentioned they were from Boston, the UUA thought about moving to Brooklyn.

Brittany Maynard also died this week. Brittany voluntarily ended her life at age 27, when the trajectory of her brain cancer pointed to certain death with relentless suffering along the way. Working with the organization Compassion and Choices—who we’re going to hear from in January—she called national attention to her story in order to advocate for death with dignity.

On a much less serious note, Jane and I had an insurance adjuster pawing through our stuff this week—asking what everything was worth. The process was totally rational and handled sensitively, but it was still a little uncomfortable as our stuff’s worth, and our own dignity, were kind of wrung out together.

So what is dignity? When protestors commit acts of violence in response to cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed...or when flags are burned—or Bibles or Beatles albums are burned—in acts of symbolic condemnation...

When might we empathize with the feelings of those shown disrespect? And when do these incidents call for a bold defense of free expression, even if we don’t sympathize with the content of the expression?

When a culture insists that there is honor in vengeance, that is, that one must repay an eye for an eye and if you don’t do this you’ve given up your dignity ... do we have to honor that cultural expression?

What is dignity? I’ve mumbled that word so many times gliding over it as I affirm the inherent worth and dignity of all people...but do I have any idea what I’m talking about? I fear it’s something I’ve long taken for granted, something so intuitively obvious that I’ve never bothered to ask what it means.

And maybe I’m not the only one. I often go to my *Book of Quotations by Women* in order to get insights on a topic I’m preaching about. But I was really surprised this time: in this thick book of humanitarian themes published by the Unitarian Universalist Beacon Press, there was nothing on dignity. I turned to two other interfaith sources: nothing. Even our gray hymnal where in the back you can find readings or songs on particular topics, dignity is not a category. Now, “inherent worth and dignity” is a category, but I wonder how often we just slide those concepts together thoughtlessly.

I wonder because on the websites devoted to quotes—even though there *are* plenty of quotes with the word “dignity” in there somewhere, it’s mostly used as a throwaway word, with its significance assumed, and nothing really said about *what* it signifies.

When asked about the meaning of our first principle, “promoting the inherent worth and dignity of every person,” I’ve always said it’s about how we should treat one another as-if each person has worth and dignity.

And this is worth saying. It’s important to hold up as a key principle—because it’s hard to recognize dignity within people when they behave in ways that we find inhumane or undignified.

So treating people as-if they have dignity, that is, treating people with respect has been my default understanding of what it's all about.

Nelson Mandela said: "Any man or institution that tries to rob me of my dignity will lose." But I don't know if he meant that someone who tries to take his dignity will lose because Nelson Mandela will never give it up...or whether he meant that it's not something a person CAN lose under any circumstances...not something we could give up, even if we wanted to.

In the King James Version of the bible the English word, "dignity," is used as a translation for three different words from the original Hebrew. So maybe we'd understand dignity better if we'd first acknowledge that it's not just one thing.

Some would say that dignity arises from humility; it is dignified to quietly recognize our limits and our faults. Others say the opposite: that dignity is a function of pride, it's the recognition of our own strengths...or even if we don't have any strengths, it's making a claim for our essential human goodness.

Sometimes dignity is used to denote status. That dignity means ranking *above* someone, anyone, at least being above the untouchables.

But others contend that even the lowest status people on earth are equal to everyone else in dignity. But is that just a nice way to pacify the rabble?

Or is dignity something we must *earn*? Is it something we have only if we demonstrate by our manner or bearing that we have it?

Is dignity found in doing our duty? Restraining ourselves...controlling our urges to harm or to take from others? But what if we have no urge to harm or to take from others? Do we still get credit? Does it count as dignified behavior if we're kind and generous without even trying?

==

Is dignity about moderation? Steering clear of the extremes? Philosophers from the Buddha to Aristotle have advocated taking the middle path and finding the golden mean, but in the battle between the provocateurs who delight in giving offense and the reactionaries who too easily take offense, is there a simple middle ground?

I think not. We need to stand with the principles represented at *both* ends. We cannot say that dignity outweighs free expression or vice versa. Nor can we satisfactorily settle into the mushy middle where I won't kill you if you don't criticize me.

We cannot give veto power over speech to just anyone who claims to be offended by what we say. But neither can we be surprised that when people find their deepest values under threat, they lash back without thinking.

If only it were simple. But it's not. In 1991, in the south of France, a bar advertised a dwarf-tossing competition. The mayor called it off, so the dwarf, Manuel Wackenheim, sued. The

district court found in favor of the dwarf, saying that just because local officials find the activity undignified doesn't mean it's disturbing the peace.

Well the mayor appealed to the French Supreme Court and won. The high court explained that "using a person affected by a physical handicap...as a projectile...infring[es] the dignity of the human person" and can therefore legitimately be banned.

But Mr. Wackenheim was no pushover. He appealed the case to the Human Rights Committee of the United Nations, established under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which France is a signatory. Wackenheim argued that respect for his dignity demanded that he be allowed to engage in any employment he chooses. But he lost again, with the court contending that if he allowed himself to be degraded it would undermine respect for little people in general.

Advocates *for and against* gay marriage make very similar arguments.

And the challenges go on. Reading University in England once kicked an atheist group out of its organization fair because the group displayed a pineapple named "Muhammad." A speaker for the group said, "We wanted to celebrate the fact that we live in a country in which free speech is protected, and where it is lawful to call a pineapple by whatever name one chooses." But administrators got nervous and told the atheists: either the pineapple goes, or you do. They held their ground and the pineapple was taken away, then returned. Then they renamed the pineapple Jesus and they were kicked out altogether.

And of course there's the hit Broadway play, *The Book of Mormon*, a satire by the creators of *South Park* (which I think is one of the crudest, most undignified, artful, and hilarious shows on television). The play makes fun of Mormons, of course. But the official Mormon response was rather calm: "The production may attempt to entertain audiences for an evening but the Book of Mormon, as a volume of scripture, will change people's lives forever by bringing them closer to Christ." In fact the Latter Day Saints even took out advertising in the playbill encouraging attendees to learn more about *their* Book of Mormon, saying, "The book is always better."

==

Salman Rushdie's book, *The Satanic Verses*, criticized islam both with gratuitous lampoon and with some fitting jabs at Muhammed's hypocrisy in his treatment of women. For this, Rushdie earned a death sentence from the Ayatollah Khomeini. And while he's lived long enough since then to publish a memoir about his life in hiding, Rushdie has had translators and publishers in four countries shot or stabbed for their association with him.

In *The Satanic Verses* a character says: "A poet's work is to name the unnamable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world and stop it from going to sleep."

"A poet's work is to name the unnamable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world and stop it from going to sleep."

It's a provocative statement, but dignified enough to find a place on those quotes websites next to the other inspirational bits—from the philosophical to the sappy. Interestingly though, the quote always ends there—rather than continuing with Rushdie's next line in the novel:

“And if rivers of blood flow from the cuts his verse inflict, then they will nourish him.”

Did Rushdie have to be so brazen? Was he not asking for trouble in writing that? Perhaps, but perhaps he did so because he saw no other way to stop the world from going to sleep.

==

In 1995 an Egyptian scholar had his marriage annulled and he was forced into exile because he had the audacity to apply modern methods of literary criticism to the Quran. You know, just basic academic analysis. Very dangerous.

A couple of years ago, 25,000 indignant muslims rioted in Bangladesh and set fire to 22 buddhist temples and 2 hindu temples. They were stirred up by a photo posted on Facebook. Police arrested the man who posted it.

But do not despair. Institutions change. Points of view change. For example in 1880 Pope Leo XIII said: “Woman...must be subject to her husband...not, indeed, as a servant, but as a companion, so that her obedience shall be wanting in neither honour nor dignity.” That is: to uphold their dignity, women must accept their inequality.

But 100 years later John Paul II explicitly rejected this idea (while assuring the faithful that the church never changes its mind). In regard to gender, John Paul wrote, dignity arises from a recognition of two things: equality between the sexes, and also the “specific diversity and personal originality” of men and women. That is, men and women express their dignity when men behave as men and women behave as women.

So it only took 100 years to get to separate but equal. Not fast enough for today's radical nuns I'm sure, but it could be worse: a 1990 declaration on Human Rights in Islam had an even uglier contortion: asserting that, in Islam, women have “equal dignity” but not equal rights.

==

As we were driving around getting to know Whatcom county last week Jane and I pulled into a gas station with a sign that said “clean restrooms.” Well, I went into one and it was disgusting. I didn't want to touch anything so I raced right back out to the car. After about ten minutes I started honking and honking...wondering where Jane was. I still had to pee and I wanted to get on the road to the next exit. Finally she comes out and I complain about how filthy the restroom was I say how did you stay in there so long didn't it smell awful? Well yeah she says so I took some paper towels and got 'em wet and I did what the sign said. (Clean restrooms.) Yuck, I said, you disgust me, don't touch me.

==

In a creedless congregation where we say everyone is welcome, it's hard to know how to uphold our ideal of honoring one another's dignity, while simultaneously honoring free expression, and

our appropriate prophetic sense that calls us to criticize and even intervene when we see injustice.

In a creedless congregation everyone is welcome, but not every behavior is welcome. That leaves a LOT of room for ambiguity and potential uneasiness. Which is troubling, because we want this to be a safe place, a place where people can feel free to be themselves. So I think we need to begin by acknowledging that these two ideals will sometimes come into conflict.

To grow as individuals and as a community, we need a place where we will be nurtured, not threatened by dissent and discomfort. AND in order to thrive, sometimes, our comfort zones need to be stretched, and our expectations subverted.

A couple of weeks ago the choir had 17 different people doing solos up here. It was humbling, I sensed, for some of the soloists, who ordinarily would not have chosen to be so vulnerable. Humbling to be received graciously in their imperfection. But also empowering, I think to let go of how they might be perceived, and to just belt out their truth. I thought afterward about Aretha Franklin singing “RESPECT—find out what it means to me,” and I wondered: is she pleading for someone else to show her respect, or is she simply claiming it for herself?

Dignity has something to do with how the world treats us. And it has something to do with how we present ourselves to the world. It’s kind of like a fun-house mirror—when we’re standing in between two giant mirrors, each reflecting the other—to infinity.

Imagine yourself in that spot right now. Turn your head just enough to look into the eternal depths, and imagine yourself saying: dignity is before me, behind me, above me and below me, within, and beyond me. I am a reflection of dignity, and all I see is a reflection of the dignity I present.

Then imagine Click and Clack trying to do this exercise with a straight face. I think their laughter would echo forever.

SOCIAL JUSTICE COLLECTION

for *Honor Works*: www.honorworks.net