

NOT FOR SISSIES by Mim Neal

Unitarian Universalism is not for sissies. When you learn that UUs have no commandments, are not required to believe certain things, or say certain things, your first reaction might be: "*piece of cake, I can do this*".

Then you read our seven principles.

Even just the first one.

How can anyone possibly 'affirm and promote: the inherent worth and dignity of every person'?

Every person??

Even Hitler, Mitch McConnell, Donald Trump ... and the hundreds of thugs who stormed the Capitol of the United States on January 6, 2021?

Yup.

January 6 was bad enough (terrifying enough). Then, during the impeachment trial, we saw new video of the January 6 debacle.

It was worse than we thought.

How can we affirm the inherent worth of the invaders? There was *no* apparent worth.

Oops! That is where I need to stop. It is pretty easy to condemn the invading barbarians but just how much holier am I?

I am a product of a white, middle-class family with all of its attendant prejudices and assumptions.

In the course of my 79½ years I have, ever so slowly, discarded at least some of the racism, homophobia, and snobbery that permeated my upbringing.

During my college years I formed friendships with people from other countries, people with different attitudes and heritages. It was a beginning.

Right out of college, while working at a small newspaper, I learned of inequities that favored some employees over others and whole-heartedly participated in efforts to form the equivalent of a union to even things out. (I was my own version of Norma Rae.) I think my father, a middle-management executive, was appalled. But we still talked. People who work in steel mills are not less 'valuable' than the men who sign their paychecks.

I married a man whose roots extended deep into Appalachia. I met and learned from his relatives. I walked into the 'hollows' and saw the courage and wit of the people who lived there. We called them hillbillies but what a rich heritage they created!

My second job after my divorce was with an international organization. After I had worked there ten years, I began to get assignments in different countries. Japan was one of them. I was born in the same year as Pearl Harbor. I was raised to hate 'Japs' and Nazis. One work assignment in Japan effectively erased those taught assumptions. One visit to Hiroshima seared a new truth into my psyche: all of us are villains, all of us are victims. Each culture, each religion enriches the human family.

And I have learned volumes from Native American teachers – about our right relationship with other components of our ecosystem and the sacredness of the land on which we live.

Were you part of Namaqua's efforts to earn the title of 'welcoming congregation'? I was. And even though one of my sons is gay, I had to shift a lot of my attitudes and behaviors toward homosexuals and transexuals and peer through my heritage to discover appreciation.

I could [and probably should] list the legions of stereotypes that have dissolved after personal encounters -- sometimes on work assignments and sometimes on trips funded by an unexpected legacy. [I know I have had more opportunities than most – and I am grateful.]

Among a myriad revelations, I learned that English food is better than I had thought. Haggis is not as bad as it sounds. Turkey and Brazil and Korea are not really scary in person.

It is not rocket science. Sort through your rolodex of stereotypes. Find the one about Mexicans or the Irish. Then find yourself a Mexican or Irishman and shake their hand and listen to them. Disdain will probably be transformed into appreciation.

Think about it: now even the gifts of *women* are acknowledged.

And, having walked among ancient ruins in Peru, and Turkey and Crete, and the British Isles, I have come to understand that our ancient ancestors had great wisdom – even without computers.

The personal perceptions that have been the most difficult for me to abandon are our national illusions. The events of Jan. 6, 2021 shattered my vision of an inviolate capitol. It invoked images of coups and counter coups around the globe. Events that were never supposed to happen in this country. Now I know they can.

I also know that the concept of an inviolate country has never been true. We are a ruthless nation, built by slaves on lands stolen from indigenous peoples. I know that my nation's history is soaked with blood and injustices. Now we bar people seeking asylum and incarcerate immigrants, separating families.

Freeing ourselves from longstanding prejudices is an agonizingly slow process. I am about to participate in, probably, my sixth anti-racism seminar, studying my sixth or seventh (or tenth) book recording our vicious past.

Those are my heritage. The scar tissue on the heritages of Native Americans and People of Color and immigrants.

Acknowledging this is probably the first step toward remedies. Toward equal justice for all. It seems that, if indeed this country is ever to become what most of us have always imagined it to be, many of us will need to adopt our First Principle.

I believe the invaders were driven by fear. Fear about how their world was changing. Fear that white males would no longer be the final arbiters of our society. Fear that people of color, and women, and homosexuals, and

transsexuals, and people from different cultures, with different beliefs, would make the rules, control the economy, decide the conflicts.

The invaders had parents and spouses and kids and families that they feel are somehow threatened. Many of them have worked hard and long to 'make it' and now feel that their accomplishments are in jeopardy. Like the denizens of Appalachian's 'hollows' they have their own rich heritage.

We need to learn how to communicate with these people. It will not be easy, but we must. Once they put down their weapons and lower their voices, we need to sit at the table and listen. I believe that deep inside their beings, there is something of worth, something with which we can communicate – a bridge we can cross to understanding.

Some inherent worth.

Unless we find ways to communicate, I am afraid we will be locked into a perpetual cycle of mutual recrimination, exacerbating hatred and possibly more violence.

There is no way to move forward if half of us is not listening to the other half.

There is so much to do, so much to remedy. If we understand their fears, we can, perhaps, allay them. If they see that we are really listening, really respecting their points of view, true dialogue becomes possible.

Even mutual respect becomes possible.

This is hard work. Work that must occur over the long haul.

Look how long it has taken this old lady to admit to wrong assumptions.

But if I can do it, anyone can.

We need to shift gears from fourth to first. Slow down. Brush our teeth. Smile. And, above all, listen.

It is not a new challenge. As long as there have been people, there has been conflict.

About 700 years ago, the Sufi scholar Rumi wrote the following:

Someone asked

"What is love?"

I answered

"You will know when you become "we."

It is that simple.

And that challenging.

And be comforted. There are only six other UU principles to deal with.