

Respect
October 18, 2015
UUMSB
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The former Saturday Night Live comedian Will Farrell has brought us many important and memorable moments in cinema, from when he fought a bear and yelled “everybody panic” in a crowded basketball arena, to when he slapped on skates and was a wizard in a barn league Ice Capades. But as I was preparing for today, I remembered a line from his movie *Tallegona Nights*. He plays a NASCAR driver with few boundaries. He is arguing with his boss and says, “with all due respect,” and then says something horrible. The boss says, “that doesn’t mean you get to say whatever you want to say to me.” Farrell replies, “It sure as heck does! It’s in the Geneva Convention, look it up!” These says, when someone prefaces their comments with “With all due respect” usually it means that they recognize that a person is deserving of dignity and fair treatment, but they are choosing to say something hurtful anyway. Maybe at some time in history, it might have meant something more civil, something about speaking truth to power, but these days it means, 'I am going to say something mean.'

What does it mean to respect someone? What does respect mean? - <Conversation>

Nancy Palmer-Jones and Pat Hoerl doerfer wrote a Unitarian Universalist curriculum for families that talks about respect. They write:

Traditionally, respect for others has been related to their status-to their position in some sort of hierarchy. In other words, we have been expected to respect those whom we think (or whom society tells us) are "superior" to us, whether that superiority has been measured by age, job title, talent, power, or social position. By achieving a certain status, people are thought to have "earned" our respect, and respect for them-at least the outward signs of respect-becomes a duty or an obligation to fulfill.

There is another way of thinking about respect for others, however-a way that emphasizes the person rather than the position. In this view, we respect others as a way of creating reciprocal, symmetrical relationships. These relationships are reciprocal because they allow a back-and-forth exchange of ideas, opinions, feelings, and of respect itself; they are symmetrical because they help create an equal footing from which we can be responsive to the other person's unique qualities and needs. "You get respect when you give it," Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot writes, echoing an experience that most of us have had.

Such a view of respect requires attentiveness to individuals and groups of people. It encourages our increased engagement with others, for getting to know someone is key to deepening our respect for [them]. Curiosity, a willingness to learn, and empathy thus become components of respecting others.¹

As part of our faith tradition, respect is woven into our Principles, in spirit and in word.

1 “Let’s Talk About Respect”, <http://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/documents/hoerl%20doerferpat/respect.pdf>

Our principles are not a creed, but part of the covenant we share, a foundation from which we build our personal theologies and spiritual identities. What is the Seventh Principle? Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. And the first? The inherent worth and dignity of every person. If all of us have inherent worth, we are all worthy of respect, of being treated as if we have value. And if those two principles are held, the rest follow: justice, equity and compassion in human relations, and so on. On Friday night we were so lucky to have Rachel Gore Freed, Vice President and Chief Program Officer of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee here to talk with us about the campaigns that the UUSC is currently working on. One story in particular has stuck in my mind. She was talking about one of the family detention centers for refugees from South and Central America near the border in Texas. She said that the building was in the middle of a fracking field and that the guards would not drink the water, but that the women and children being held there had to. A woman told her that once someone important came to visit the center and was about to drink and a guard grabbed the cup out of his hand and said, “don’t drink that!” That one group of people could be deemed worthy of the right to safe water and another not, that these detention facilities exist at all, and that we know that the water table is being destroyed by fracking and have not changed behavior is so disheartening. There is no respect for the inherent worth and dignity of the women and children in this place, or for our connection to the land itself.

Respect is such a huge issue in our political system. I haven’t been able to stomach watching the Presidential debates, and have opted for reading the synopses in the paper afterward instead. I promise as we get closer I will watch, but my heart can’t take a full year of listening to people trying to twist and turn every story to get elected. Outside of the Presidential contest, you probably saw the footage of the head of Planned Parenthood being “questioned” before the congressional committee. If I heard Jason Chaffetz ask a question and then cut off Cecile Richards with the words, “we just don’t have time” one more time, I was going to scream and scream. It was a literal enactment of the desire to silence marginalized women by taking away their access to health care as their advocate, albeit a woman with quite a bit of privilege, was treated so disrespectfully. I think that it did not go well for that congressman in the backlash, but that kind of behavior goes on all the time. People say horrible things about each other that they know are not true, to get a sound bite, or control of the narrative, and we end up with a polarized, and stuck, government. This behavior does not embody a respect for other people, the people who are being governed, or the peers who are trying to get work done. *And yet*, all people have inherent worth and dignity, even the people who fundamentally see the world differently from us.

Thinking more deeply about respect and what it means is important because, just like love and compassion, it is a building block of justice work and protecting the rights of those who have been silenced. Respect puts a foot on the accelerator of change. People in power do not *have* to respect those they have marginalized when law forces them to change their behavior, but if they do, change can happen so much faster. If advocates for different policies or positions around providing services or rights to a population have respectful dialog, how much more quickly and effectively can change happen? When relationships include respect, it allows the opportunity for growth, change, for seeing things in new ways and really getting things done. When a party to a relationship is not respected, they are silenced, and their contributions to the work, to the community, go unlearned, not adopted. What could we accomplish in our government with more professional and personal respect? Our lives are enriched by each other,

and reciprocal, respectful relationships are how we get there. We can work hard to love people we disagree with, even people who hate us, but until there is a relationship based in respect, that love cannot grow into any kind of working relationship. Until the heart of one who hates is turned with love, until they see the inherent worth and dignity of those they might ignore, until they see how as Lilla Watson said, “your liberation is bound up with mine,” they will never get to a place of respect. Respect is a sign of hope and progress toward shared goals.

How do we handle interacting with people working in systems from government and safety, to medicine or education where we might be struggling to change a system, but are faced with a person, trying to do their job? How do we respond when we are not respected as people? How is it different for people with different identities? Respect is a reciprocal relationship. In a sense it is trust between people – trust in intention. Respect is not a one way street. We don’t have to respect everyone’s authority, their skills, or their power. We strive to honor and respect the inherent worth and dignity of every person, even those whose world views and beliefs are so different from our own that they might ignore or hurt us. We work to respond to hate with love and compassion.

In our Seventh Principle, we name our respect for the interdependent web. Because of our interdependence, our interconnection with everyone, and every thing on earth, when we injure that web, we will all feel it. When people are silenced, or treated as if they don’t matter, that suffering is not only felt by the people directly involved--that energy, that lack, impacts us all. The connections between us all are more than we can ever observe or fully understand. That awesomeness, is part of what invites our respect. If we respect that power, we are more likely to work hard on holding connections, on working to understand and repair relationships not only between people, but with our environment, because if we don’t it will impact us all. As Billy Collins’ writes:

But it is hard to speak of these things
how the voices of light enter the body
and begin to recite their stories
how the earth holds us painfully against
its breast made of humus and brambles
how we who will soon be gone regard
the entities that continue to return
greener than ever, spring water flowing
through a meadow and the shadows of clouds
passing over the hills and the ground
where we stand in the tremble of thought
taking the vast outside into ourselves.²

Respect is not a one way street. We don’t have to respect everyone’s authority, their skills, or their power. We strive to honor and respect the inherent worth and dignity of every person, even those whose world views and beliefs are so different from our own that they might ignore or hurt us. Consider what might be possible with a foot on the accelerator of change. We can’t force respect, but we can do everything in our power to hire, elect, and support respectful people

2 Billy Collins, “Directions”

—people who are open to see others as fully human, no matter what their background—as worthy of love and compassion. In our daily lives, we can notice how respect impacts our choices, our access to people and services, our relationships. When we struggle with the actions that people take, with how to hold any kind of relationship with people who act with hate or indifference, we can remember their humanity, and treat that with respect, even if relationships end. We can strive to live with love and compassion.

So may it be.