

Re-envisioning Our First Principle – Rev. Doug McCusker

My uncle Rudy died on New Year's Eve. He was quite a character. He was from the Philippines. When he was 16, he lied about his age so he could join the U.S. Navy during World War II. He was a veteran of the Korean and Vietnam wars, a practical joker. A great story teller, who usually threw in a heavy dose of embellishment for entertainment value. Played golf to the day before he died.

He met my aunt Millie in Philadelphia in 1949 and they fell in love. But it was against the law for them to get married in Pennsylvania. Millie was categorized as Caucasian and Rudy was Oriental. That's what they called them back then. So, Millie and Rudy went to New Jersey and got hitched.

Same thing with my father and mother. In parts of this country, such as the Southwest, they wouldn't have been allowed to get married in 1952 since she was Hispanic and he was Caucasian. They got married in Bogota, Colombia. Most people didn't have the option to marry the one they loved in a different state or a different country.

Right here in this area, is the famous story of Mildred and Richard Loving who were sentenced to a year in prison for marrying each other. She was Black and he was White. They took their case to the Supreme Court, and in 1967 they were successful in abolishing all the interracial marriage laws in this country.

Gay and Lesbian couples had to wait much longer to marry the ones they loved, but it finally happened. And yet, we are not out of the woods. Things can regress if we don't stand firm. There are systemic forces out there that are threatened by the power of love.

Martin Luther King once wrote "This is where we are. So where do we go from here? First, we must massively assert our dignity and worth. We must stand up amidst a system that still oppresses and develop an unassailable and majestic sense of values."

Dignity and worth. Sound familiar? The first of our seven principles states: "Unitarian Universalist congregations covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person."

This month's liturgical theme is Prophecy. Last week we talked about Jesus of Nazareth. Today I will quote Martin Luther King; another great prophet who challenged power with love and paid the ultimate price. And just like Jesus, we now build statues and idolize Martin with a holiday rather than do the work that he called us to do: "massively assert our dignity and worth."

To me, that's what the Black Lives Matter movement is all about. And ironically, when people oppose them with the statement, "All Lives Matter," they are unwittingly agreeing with them.

The difference is that "All Lives Matter" is an aspiration just like "inherent worth and dignity of every person." But we must never forget the verbs: "affirm", "promote", "assert." Words are cheap when they aren't backed up by action. The words "Black Lives Matter" is an inconvenient reminder that we, as a society, are not even close to realizing our aspirations. The struggle to affirm all lives and every person's worth and dignity requires opposition to systems of oppression. That's the real work.

Whenever I hear the first principle, I associate it with loving those who are hard to love. To me, it is the Unitarian Universalist way of saying "love thy neighbor even if they are Hitler or an axe murderer."

Our children are taught this principle by rewording it to say “every person is important.” I completely agree. It is a statement about inclusivity and equality. When you drill down to the next layer, like the prophets Martin and Jesus do, you learn that to truly affirm the worth and dignity of every person is to love all lives.

Martin said, “power without love is reckless and abusive, love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice.”

The words of the prophets are never meant to be easy listening. They push us beyond our comfort zones. It’s not enough to love or to have power. Power and love must work together. To truly love, we must oppose oppression in all its forms. But first, we must confront the ways that we, as individuals, enable oppression in our lives – another inconvenient truth.

The problem is that few of us want to do that. We get easily distracted with the everyday challenges of living. Sometimes all we can focus on are the problems right in front of us like getting food on the table, raising children, taking care of our health, meeting deadlines and obeying laws.

We are bombarded with messages that tell us that we need are not enough: we must acquire more things, look sexier or younger, be entertained. And then we are frozen by the threat that there is not enough to go around; that there is a scarcity of resources. Life is turned into one big competition. We all get caught up in it.

No one is orchestrating this as a world-wide conspiracy. It is the system at work; keeping us busy maintaining the status quo. It is a massive human system of power and control; of winners and losers; what Martin called power without love. We dream to be winners with riches and fame and fear being the losers in poverty and isolation. We go along to get along. We don’t seriously question the dark sides of this system. In this way, we are complicit in the excesses of the systems of oppression.

The way off the treadmill is to expand our consciousness. Not to gain more information, but to awaken from the delusion that we are alone. This is nothing short of a spiritual transformation within our own hearts. Bell Hooks criticizes those of us who take classes to unlearn racism but keep on feeding the system. She says “Acknowledgement of racism is only significant when it leads to transformation.”

Transformation is more than learning or unlearning. It is expanded consciousness to a new reality. Jesus and Martin, with all their talk of love and power, are speaking to our hearts. They are saying “Wake up!” You are part of a much greater system of life that transcends the artificial definitions of worth and dignity that we’ve been taught.

The natural, universal, spiritual worth and dignity of everyone and all life is found in our interconnections. Most of us think we have it good because we are not sick, or poor or imprisoned. But until we consciously acknowledge the network of mutuality with our whole selves, not just our minds and our egos, can we truly be healthy, wealthy and free.

This is what Martin is talking about when he says that we must develop an unassailable and majestic sense of values. Values that go beyond our individual needs. Values that go beyond feeding the materialistic system. Values that assert the spiritual network of love for all lives.

Once you grasp this simple but profound truth you begin to sense the connections. Let’s start with how we treat those closest to us. When I do something

hurtful, there is a part of me that feels the hurt also. If I listen to that pain and respond by owning my transgression and apologizing, I stay in connection. The bond gets stronger. It's tough to do when we are caught up in our egos. Easier to do when we are caught up in our love for the other.

The same thing happens when you are part of a community like this Fellowship. We are a microcosm of the mutual network of all existence. If you hold back your gifts and resources out of fear of scarcity, you are ultimately denying yourself. Or to put it more positively, when you share what you have for the common good, you receive much more in return. The community thrives and we feel alive when we are all sharing what we have.

I'm talking about a vow of mutual enrichment. On Christmas day, rather than give a sermon, I opened the floor for everyone to share stories of when they either helped another in need, or when they received unsolicited assistance. The stories went right to the heart. The tellers seemed to glow with expressions of joy.

We then went to a nursing home after the service and simply sat with strangers. I'll never forget the people who I met. Ordinary people connecting. We were tapping into that network of mutuality, asserting our shared dignity and worth through love. It was a powerful experience that far exceeded what any one of us did for the other.

I hear the same feedback from those of you who have been helping provide food at the Community Meal and the Respite House. The key point is to be aware of our connections with the greater web of life. And yes, this also includes connecting with those who are hard to love. Those with whom we disagree politically and religiously. They are part of the network of mutuality also and we depend on them as they depend on us.

Last week, our youth group watched a trailer of an upcoming documentary about a boogie-woogie pianist named Darryl Davis. He's played with all the greats such as Chuck Berry, Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis. But, this wasn't a movie about music. It was about how he has befriended hundreds of Klu Klux Klans members. He is African-American, and he totally abhors what the KKK stands for. But he doesn't let it keep him from getting to know the human under the hood. And they get to know him. Over 30 years, several hundred Klansmen have renounced their white supremacist ideology after becoming friends with Darryl. They connected with him, and in the process, affirmed their mutual worth and dignity. That is power and love working together.

Right now, our society is as polarized as we've ever been. That feeds the system and keeps power in the hands of those who profit from oppression. The Darryl Davises of the world are fighting the system and resisting it at its core through the power of love. It is much harder than throwing stones. And ultimately more effective. Jesus of Nazareth and Martin Luther King were experts at unifying people across deep differences by connecting their common humanity. That is the work that we are called to do.

Tomorrow, if you really want to honor King's legacy, look for common ground with a stranger. If you are committed to affirming the dignity and worth of every person, reach out to someone who sees the world differently than you. Listen to them. Really listen beyond the words. Listen to their fears and pain, their joys and sorrows. See if you can hear their humanity speaking. And don't be afraid to speak your own truth, not to convert, but to connect.

If enough of us do this, on a consistent basis, the current systems of oppression will fall apart; worn away by the power of love. May it Be So!