



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

**Cultivating Empathy:
The Worth and Dignity of Every Person
— *Without Exception***

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

2 October 2016

frederickuu.org

Occasionally I am asked, “Why does Unitarian Universalism have such a long name?” From a marketing perspective, **it probably wasn’t ideal to saddle ourselves with a ten-syllable name based on two ancient Christian heresies:**

- Unitarianism - *rejecting* that the Trinity is the only or best way of conceptualizing God and *affirming* the unity of God — that whatever we mean by the word “God,” all religions are referring to the same larger reality.
- Universalism - *rejecting* the idea that anyone will suffer eternal damnation and *affirming* that no one should be left outside the circle of love.

Interestingly, before we settled on the compromise of Unitarian Universalism, **other possible names were considered** such as: “The Universal Church,” “The United Liberal Church of America,” the “Free Church of America,” or the “Free Church Fellowship” (Wright 98, 121; Robinson 167). But in 1961 when the American Unitarian Association merged with the Universalist Church of America, both organizations were anxious about losing their distinctive identities. As a result, we inherited the unwieldy name of Unitarian Universalism.

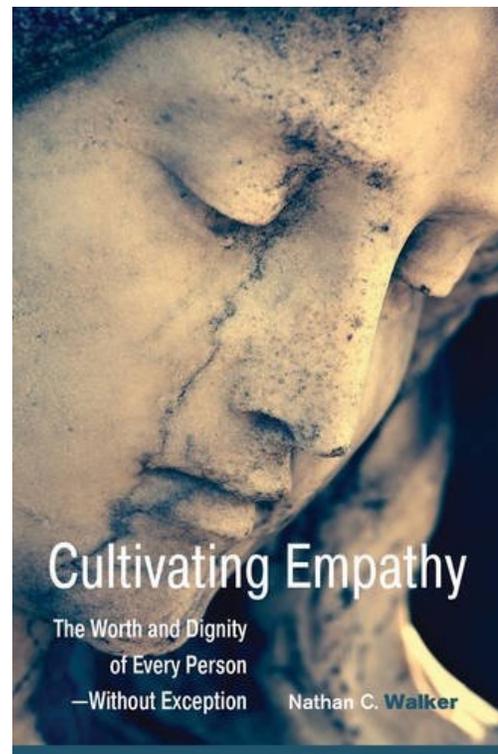
From another angle, our forebears were right that our long name is a regular reminder of our dual heritage of Unitarianism and Universalism. And this past Friday was the **anniversary of John Murray preaching the first Universalist sermon in America on September 30, 1770.**

(You'll hear a lot more about that occasion as we approach the year 2020, which will be the 250th anniversary of Universalism in this country.)

So on this Sunday closest to the anniversary of the first Universalist sermon in the land that came to be The United States, I wanted to explore some of what Universalism means today. Part of our Universalist heritage is a **rejection of Original Sin and the idea that humans are “totally depraved”** — and an **affirmation of what our UU First Principle calls “The inherent worth and dignity of every person.”** Over time the aspiration to respect each person's dignity and worth, led Universalism to evolve **from a focus on universal salvation for all in a next world to a universal call to “Love the hell out of *this world*.”** It is often easiest to love those who are most like us, but our Universalist heritage challenges us to recognize the inherent worth and dignity of *every person*.

One of the most interesting explorations I have found recently of what Universalism means today is a short book by my colleague The Rev. Nathan Walker titled **Cultivating Empathy: The Worth and Dignity of Every Person — Without Exception**. Nate is the Executive Director of the Religious Freedom Center of the Newseum Institute in Washington, D.C. And anyone who regularly facilitates discussions about the First Amendment has a lot of experience navigating conflict between opposing sides, because religious liberty is one of the most controversial topics of our time.

The primary spiritual practice that Nate invites us to experiment with is the **moral imagination**: “**the ability to anticipate or project oneself into the middle of a moral dilemma or conflict and understand all the points of view.**” Note that, “Understanding does not necessarily mean agreement” (xvii-xviii). Along those lines, there are many people and groups in our world today that I do not yet fully understand — and I continue to use my moral imagination to increasingly



comprehend *where they are coming from*. What are the parallels in your life? What people or groups do you find most mystifying? Who is it most difficult for you to understand, empathize with, and recognize their inherent worth and dignity? Where might you be called to experiment with expanding your moral imagination?

In the Thursday night class I am teaching here at UUCF on “What’s Fair? Who Decides? Navigating the Ethics of Privilege,” one of the insights we’ve been discussing is that **the ways in which we are privileged are often invisible to us**. Whereas, it is much easier to see the ways that you are *different*, the ways in which you are swimming *against* the current of society. For example:

- Sexism is more obvious to women and less obvious to men.
- Racism is more obvious to people of color and less obvious to white people.
- Classism is more obvious to people who are poor and less obvious to people who are rich.

I could go on in regard to sexual identity, ability, nationality, religion, and other social categories. The point is that we can use our moral imagination to consider the ways that people and groups experience the world very differently — which can empower our work to build a more just and equitable world.

To give you one example of the moral imagination, consider the experience of Ruby Bridges (1954-). In 1960, when she was six-years-old, she was the first black child to integrate an all-white school in New Orleans. That same year, a child psychologist interviewed her several times. He was stunned at her moral imagination — her ability to empathize with the people who were threatening and taunting her. When the psychologist skeptically asked, “You felt sorry for *them*?” She responded, “**Well, don’t you think they need feeling sorry for?**” (xvii)?

The opposite of empathy and the moral imagination is *xenophobia*: “fear of the strange, foreign, or unfamiliar.” In place of the word *xenophobia*, Nate proposes the simpler term ***otherize***, meaning to make a person or group seem like an “other,” different from us, and one of “*them*.” And he cites seven ways that people often “otherize” instead of practicing empathy and the moral imagination. We can:

1. **Demonize** - treating the other as someone to be feared and eliminated if possible.

2. Romanticize - treating the other as far superior to ourselves
3. Colonize - treating the other as inferior
4. Generalize - treating the other as a non-individual
5. Trivialize - ignoring what makes the other disturbingly different.
6. Homogenize - claiming there really is no difference
7. Vaporize - refusing to acknowledge the presence of the other at all. (xix)

Looking back on your life, which of those approaches have been most (or least) tempting to you, which ones have you been on the receiving end of, and which ones do you witness most frequently in our world today?

There are many examples in Nate's book of struggling to be our *best selves* (**when we are relaxed, well rested, and most able to empathize and practice the moral imagination**) and to overcome our *worst selves* (**when we are under stress and sometimes succumb to the temptation to otherize those around us**). For now, I will limit myself to two examples, and as I share them, I invite you to consider parallels in your own life.

Nate calls the first episode, "**Meeting the One Percent.**" He and his partner Vikram had arrived an hour and a half early to get a good seat at a highly anticipated lecture at a nearby university (1). Not long before the lecture was to begin, Vikram went to the bathroom. After he was gone, a woman approached his seat, and picked up Vikram's coat. Nate turned and said, "I'm sorry, that's reserved. He's in the bathroom." But she sat down anyway. He repeated himself, but she stared straight ahead, ignoring him, and passed Vikram's coat to her husband, who dropped it on the floor.

About that time, he spotted Vikram returning down the aisle, and said, "Look, he's right there." Her response was, "We sponsored this event." In the midst of this stressful situation, let's just say that Nate's best self did not emerge. He began speaking loudly in an attempt to publicly shame her, and concluded by saying, "You must be someone really important. Are you famous? If not, let me help you be." **He took a photo of her with his phone, and said, "I'll label this one Entitlement."** As the light dimmed in the theater, Nate and Vikram managed to find a seat at the back (3).

Reflecting later, he realized that two days before in his Sunday sermon he had preached: “When we feel the impulse to be enraged, we must accept the invitation to be empathetic and no longer make people the object of our aggression” (2). It turns out, **the moral imagination is easier said than done!**

And by no means am I saying that we should be doormats when we encounter injustice. Rather, the invitation is to become *more conscious* of the temptation to otherize in times of stress or conflict — demonizing the other, treating them as inferior, generalizing them in ways that ignore the reasons that may have led to them behave badly on this occasion.

And here’s an even more important twist. In addition to the *intrinsic* value of recognizing each person’s inherent worth and dignity, there is also *extrinsic* value to practicing the moral imagination. Nate, for example, found that **as long as he continued to otherize this woman, he remained obsessed about her in an unhealthy way**: rehearsing the story to everyone he met and showing them the picture he took. For him, one step in moving on was deleting the picture (5-6).

He also realized in retrospect that his righteous anger at her was amplified because this episode happened during the crackdowns on the #OccupyWallStreet protesters, which left Nate predisposed to anger not at the rich generally, but at those who seemed both rich *and* selfish. In contrast to his angry shaming of this woman, speaking from his best self, Nate has written:

I once believed that it was powerful to condemn wrongdoers. I believe it right to tear down another’s unexamined assumptions and to vaporize those whose presence was not worthy of my attention. **I believed that others were the cause of my aggression, others were to blame for my feelings of despair, disappointment, and righteous indignation**.... I was doing justice...all while being an ass.... As Thich Nhat Hanh, a Zen Buddhist, once said, **“I came to set the prisoner free only to realize the prisoner was me”** (7-8).

What might it look like in the coming days and weeks — when we inevitably find ourselves stumbling into a conflict — to take a step back, use our moral imagination to consider where the other is coming from, and reflect on how our next words or actions might emerge from our best self?

That being said, we've already seen that Nate found it easier to preach this approach on Sunday than to live it Tuesday night in the theater. And for this second encounter, I want to complicate matters further with a story about Thích Nhất Hạnh (1926-), whose wisdom was the capstone of our first example. Hanh is one of our great living wisdom teachers, and was nominated by The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. for the Nobel Peace Prize. Yet, a few years ago when attending a retreat led by Hạnh, Nate was taken aback when he discovered that **men and women were required to sit separately in the meditation hall** (60).

As we have already seen, Nate is not a shy wallflower. So he respectfully and compassionately asked Hanh about the reasoning behind this gender separation which seems like an obvious contradiction to his teachings about interdependence and *nonduality*. Hanh replied, **“Ask any woman and she will tell you she likes to be with other women.... It is not segregation”** (65). In general, Hanh is a source of tremendous wisdom, insight, and experience. But on this point, he seems to be unwisely defending an antiquated, patriarchal practice using unconvincing, sexist reasoning (Walker 65).

At first Nate was wounded and disillusioned. But as he continued to practice empathy and moral imagination, he began to see that Hanh was not speaking from a vacuum. As wise as he is, he is also a product of his social location, as are we all. Nate writes:

I began to see Hanh as a continuation of his teachers. He is, after all, the forty-second *patriarch* of the Lâm Tế school of Zen Buddhism. I began to see my experience at this retreat as an *intercultural* encounter between a Vietnamese and an American; an *intergenerational* encounter between an eighty-three-year-old and a thirty-three-year-old; and an *interreligious* encounter between a Zen master and a Unitarian Universalist minister. (66)

And here's the key point: **“I began to see him as simply human. I was neither romanticizing him nor demonizing him.”** We “otherize” people not only when we demonize, generalize, and trivialize — treating them as *lesser* than ourselves — but also when we *romanticize* them, treating them as *superior* to ourselves. What person or groups are you most likely to romanticize? How might your moral imagination help you more fully see the imperfect messiness that *all* human beings share?

For now, I'll conclude with these words from Nate Walker's book, Cultivating Empathy: The Worth and Dignity of Every Person — Without Exception:

It is possible for me to understand another person's views...without necessarily agreeing with them or silencing my own voice. Understanding is a prerequisite for empathy.... **This encounter becomes an ethical one when we use the moral imagination to see our shared humanity and dare to forge a new way of being with one another....**

When we observe oppression, **let us develop strategies that free not only the oppressed but also the oppressor.** Let us remember that those who use their power to deny freedom to others are also imprisoned and are also worthy of care. **Do not let their unjust actions inspire us to cruelty, or else we will soon become what we set out against....**

Rather than shoving our foot on the oppressor's neck, let us instead reach out a hand, offer a seat, and show them, and even ourselves, a new way of justice-making by collectively experimenting with the moral imagination.

All of that is easier said than done, but I am grateful to be with you on the journey toward beloved community and collective liberation — in which we all get free.