

**"Watering the Seeds of Dignity"**  
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[This sermon references the 2006 Berry Street Essay by William F. Schulz. You can read this essay online: <http://www.uuma.org/berrystreet/Essays/BSE2006.htm>]

**SERMON**

Last June I was sitting on my bedroom floor, clothes and suitcases spread out around me. I was trying to figure out how to bring just one of those suitcases with me to the retreat center I was heading to, a Buddhist community led by Thich Nhat Hahn.

In keeping with a Zen-like “one bowl-one spoon” approach, I decided to bring just one book. But which book? Should I bring a juicy piece of great literature or poetry, or maybe a hefty work of theology?

In the end I chose this book—[holding up my copy]--the same book that Martin Luther King, Jr. carried with him in his travels: Jesus and the Disinherited, written by a friend of the King family, Howard Thurman, one of the most respected religious leaders of the 20th century.

Rev. Thurman attended Morehouse College with Martin Luther King Sr., and he studied under influential thinkers like Benjamin E. Mays and John Hope, both of whom served as President of Morehouse College.

For three weeks I read Howard Thurman and listened to Thich Nhat Hahn.

Eventually, I came to see that what they were both talking was dignity.

Both Buddha and Jesus taught that awakening an individual to an awareness of her own dignity would lead her to treat others and herself with love and compassion.

Not the strength of law, not the enforcement of religious authority, but a greater awareness of one’s own dignity leads to lovingkindness.

The concept of dignity is implicit in the world’s major religions. It is explicitly named in the Unitarian Universalist principles, the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, and the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Each January, the president of the United States makes a proclamation recognizing Martin Luther King Day, honoring him for promoting the dignity of every person.

If dignity is so widely accepted, then why do so many people suffer indignities? Why are they treated as if they had no worth, no nobility in their personhood?

What is it--this “dignity,” other than some nice-sounding language for dressing up proclamations and declarations. Is it, as stated in our principles and purposes, inherent in every human being? Or, as one prominent Unitarian Universalist proclaimed, just a social construct—something assigned by the community to those who are deemed worthy?

A few years ago, William Schulz, past president of the Unitarian Universalist Association and former Executive Director of Amnesty International USA delivered the Berry Street Essay.

A small piece of history here: In 1832, William Ellery Channing, minister of the Federal Street Church in Boston, opened the door of his vestry and invited his Unitarian colleagues to an annual lecture. That door opened on Berry Street. The Berry Street Essay is delivered by a distinguished UU minister at our Annual General Assembly. There has been a lecture each year since 1832, except for one year during World War II.

In the 2006 Berry Street Essay, entitled “What Torture Taught Me,” Rev. Schulz admitted that he no longer believes in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Years of dealing with torture and other heinous crimes caused him to abandon this basic principle. Now he sees dignity, not as inherent, but as a social construct.

I agree with him.  
And I disagree with him.

I agree that one type of dignity is constructed by society—a social concept of dignity. And I believe there is another type of dignity, one that is inherent in human nature—a religious concept of dignity.

The first type of dignity refers to a status created by humans.  
The second refers to a nobility that is not man-made.

Social Dignity is assigned by other people.  
It can be easily taken away.

Inherent Dignity is a capacity intrinsic to human nature.  
It can never be taken away from anyone.

Social Dignity grants status to some people and withholds it from others.

When you have lost your job, your family, your home, your money, when you are thrown out into the cold, you lose your social dignity. If this type of dignity was the only kind, then you’d have nothing left. The ‘somebody’ you used to be would be gone. You’d be ‘nobody.’

But there is another kind of dignity, a far more important kind of dignity--one that is not dependent on fickle human notions of what is dignified. Rather, it is a dignity inherent in every human being—not just the select.

William Ellery Channing gave us a conception of human nature that includes a wide range of human capacities: critical thinking, affection, imagination, ability to respond to beauty, moral conscience, religious sentiment. According to Channing, all of these capacities are good, but if they are not given the chance to unfold, if they are blocked, then a person may act in violent, hateful ways.

The Buddhists give the name “seeds” to the qualities that Channing calls capacities. I like this metaphor. A Buddhist rendering of Channing’s conception of human nature would be a storehouse in which there are many seeds.

Everyone is born with these seeds, with a full range of capacities. Dignity is one of those seeds, a particularly important one.

Dignity is the capacity to rise to our highest and best selves—the capacity to rise to our true nobility, the closest we can get to our divine nature.

Given that dignity is a capacity, a potentiality,  
it is our struggle to make it an actuality,  
it is our struggle to choose dignity over indignity that brings nobility to our lives.

The potential for this type of nobility, for this type of dignity is present in every human being. In some, the seed of dignity is fresh and green. In others, this seed has lain dry and dormant for years. No one has watered it in a very long time.

Howard Thurman’s book is like a watering can for those seeds. Written in 1946, the book’s main audience was the “poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed.”

The book continues to be reprinted today because it really is for everyone “who stand[s] with their backs against the wall,” as he put it. It is for all those who need “profound succor and strength to enable to them to live in the present with dignity...”

Who among us doesn’t know what it’s like to be up against the wall in some sense or another?  
Who among us doesn’t need profound strength to live each present moment with dignity?

When I was younger, the seed of my dignity lay dormant. It was buried deep in the scaring experiences of my ancestors living under Japanese oppression, then occupying forces, military dictatorship, and American racism. And so my seed of dignity lay quiet for a long time.

In a collection of essays by African American men (Speak My Name : Black Men on Masculinity and the American Dream by Don Belton, writer Haki Madhubuti tells a story about dignity that resonates with my own.

Madhubuti is one of those prolific people whose identity can't be condensed into one word, like poet, which he is, or educator, which he is. He has created a number of independent Black institutions, including a publishing house called Third World Press.

One day when he was 13, his mother asked him to go to the Detroit Public Library to check out a book called Black Boy by Richard Wright. He refused to go. He didn't want to ask a white librarian for a book by a black author, especially with the word black in the title.

I remember feeling the same embarrassment and shame about my race. No one actually told me or Madhubuti that we should hate ourselves. But we were products of white institutions and white educational systems that reinforced the perceived supremacy of western civilization.

At his mother's insistence, Madhubuti did finally get that book. He read it and hasn't stopped reading since. For him, reading about the experiences of other African Americans watered his seed of inherent dignity, even as the world around him proclaimed his lack of it.

Where can we turn for succor and strength, for water for our seeds of dignity?  
And how can we provide water for the dignity of others?

Howard Thurman suggests a way by telling us a familiar parable:  
One day a crowd of men brings a woman to Jesus. She has been caught in the act of adultery. To the men, this woman is not a person. She is an adulteress.

Reminding Jesus that the law calls her to be stoned to death, they ask him for his judgment. Jesus replies, "He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone." Silence. One by the one the men left.

"Has no one condemned you," Jesus asks the woman?

"No one," she answered.

"Neither do I condemn you: go, and sin no more."

Jesus is showing reverence for this person's inherent dignity.  
He meets the woman where she is and treats her as the inherently dignified person she is.  
He stirs in her a confidence in her own worth.

As Howard Thurman describes it, "He places a crown over her head, which, for the rest of her life she would keep trying to grow tall enough to wear."

When I hear Thurman's parable, I picture the Buddha holding the crown.  
When you hear this parable, maybe some other image comes to mind.

Unfortunately, a lot of people can relate to the woman in this parable. People of color, especially, know what it's like to be treated like a 2-dimensional stereotype instead of a human being with inherent dignity.

In her book about young African-American identity, Natasha Tarpley recalls her sophomore year at Harvard. One day she was taking the computer from her dorm room to her family's car waiting at the curb. She was going home for the weekend and wanted to finish a paper. Her 16 year old brother was helping. When they got outside, a security guard stopped them.

"Don't Move-you're not going anywhere."

Natasha's mother came out of her car to talk to the guard. He wouldn't listen. Soon, four squad cars arrived at the scene. Other students going in and out of the building were asked if they knew Natasha; if she really did live there.

Eventually the police left and Natasha and her family were free to go. (from Testimony: Young African-Americans on Self-Discovery and Black Identity Edited by Natasha Tarpley)

If you live in a community that is constantly suspicious, demanding verification, putting you down, it is very difficult to find the strength to water your seed of dignity.

Writing later about this experience, Natasha says she lost a part of herself that day—a part that was hopeful about acceptance and equal dignity.

And what about the security guard?

It's too easy to label him a racist.

People are more complicated than that.

He is a product of his experiences too. Who has held the crown above his head? What is keeping his inherent dignity dormant, if he is not able to see another human being fully, but instead can only see a stereotype?

And what about the bystanders? Was their inherent dignity in play in this situation?

If you were there, and you were trying to rise up to your best and highest self, what would you have done?

It's difficult to intervene in a tense situation and to have a presence of mind that is dignified and thoughtful.

It is difficult to hold a crown over the head of someone who is behaving badly.

It is even difficult to hold a crown over the head of the one who is being hurt.

It takes extraordinary spiritual strength to be able to stand tall in your own dignity, while others are insulting you.

It's easy to get discouraged and question yourself as Hans and his friends did in Memphis. [From the Heart testimony by Hans Von Baeyer] They were cold and damp and ridiculed by the man, they were starting to feel like nobodies.

But here comes Dr. King, holding a crown above those students' heads, saying, "you are somebody. You are rising to your highest calling."

For some of us, rising to our highest and best selves look like a pretty steep hill to climb.

Some of us struggle more because we've been hurt. In some cases we have been hurt so profoundly that it may feel like those seeds may never sprout.

But the capacity is there, the potential, the possibility is always there, because the choice is always there.

Victor Frankl, writing about his experience in a Nazi concentration camp concludes that "everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

Every day we have a choice of watering that seed of inherent dignity or depriving it. Every day, we have a choice: will I act with dignity and live up to my highest and best self? Will I promote the dignity of the people around me?

The words "Inherent Worth and Dignity" are displayed on our walls; they are inscribed in our books. It's time to bring those words down from lofty abstraction and put them into concrete spiritual practice.

This is our first principle. May it live through us in all we do.  
AMEN!