READING

From “Can You Say Hero?” by Tom Junod, Esquire magazine, November 1998

Once upon a time, a little boy with a big sword went into battle against Mister Rogers. Or maybe, if the truth be told, Mister Rogers went into battle against a little boy with a big sword, for Mister Rogers didn't *like* the big sword.

It was one of those swords that really isn't a sword at all; it was a big plastic contraption with lights and sound effects, and it was the kind of sword used in defense of the universe by the heroes of the television shows that the little boy liked to watch.

The little boy with the big sword did not watch Mister Rogers. In fact, the little boy with the big sword didn't know who Mister Rogers *was*, and so when Mister Rogers knelt down in front of him, the little boy with the big sword looked past him and through him, and when Mister Rogers said, "Oh, my, that's a big sword you have," the boy didn't answer, and finally his mother got embarrassed and said, "Oh, honey, c'mon, that's *Mister Rogers*," and felt his head for fever.

Of course, she knew who Mister Rogers was, because she had grown up with him, and she knew that he was good for her son, and so now, with her little boy zombie-eyed under his blond bangs, she apologized, saying to Mister Rogers that she knew he was in a rush and that she knew he was here in Penn Station taping his program and that her son usually wasn't *like* this, he was probably just tired.

Except that Mister Rogers wasn't going anywhere. Yes, sure, he was taping, and right there, in Penn Station in New York City, were rings of other children wiggling in wait for him, but right now his patient gray eyes were fixed on the little boy with the big sword, and so he stayed there, on one knee, until the little boy's eyes finally focused on Mister Rogers, and he said, "It's not a sword; it's a death ray."

A death ray! Oh, honey, Mommy *knew* you could do it. And so now, encouraged, Mommy said, "Do you want to give Mister Rogers a hug, honey?"

But the boy was shaking his head no, and Mister Rogers was sneaking his face past the big sword and the armor of the little boy's eyes and whispering something in his ear—something that, while not changing his mind about the hug, made the little boy look at Mister Rogers in a new way, with the eyes of a child at last, and nod his head yes.

We were heading back to his apartment in a taxi when I asked him what he had said. "Oh, I just knew that whenever you see a little boy carrying something like that, it means that he wants to show people that he's strong on the outside. I just wanted to let him know that he was strong on the inside, too. And so that's what I told him. I said, 'Do you know that you're strong on the inside, too?’ Maybe it was something he needed to hear."

SERMON

Founding documents are the sorts of things that organizations of all kinds tend to adopt with great solemnity, then file away someplace, where they never again see the light of day.
So it was largely with us after Unitarians and Universalists voted in 1961 to create a new entity, the Unitarian Universalist Association, to join our two ventures in common purpose.

But that changed in the mid 1970s. Dissenting voices, particularly women, began calling attention to the sexism and theological narrowness expressed in documents that described our guiding principles. Many meetings and much conversation later, our General Assembly in 1985 concluded a process to revise our bylaws to reflect a new consensus on how we understood the principles that guide us.

And this time, instead of filing them away, we broadcast them widely. They were posted on the bulletin boards of churches – you can find them framed in our foyer – and some congregations made a practice of reciting them regularly in worship. We printed them on bookmarks and brochures. When our hymnal was revised in 1990 – the grey volume, "Singing the Living Tradition," that you find in your pew backs – we placed them at the very front.

In time, we composed a version that simplified the flowery language of the original so that our children might grasp more easily what we as a faith tradition stand for and hope to achieve. These are the words that you spoke in the responsive reading earlier.

For a denomination that proclaims, as Unitarian minister Samuel Longfellow put it, that "revelation is not sealed," it's a little remarkable that today those words remain unchanged. In fact, about 15 years ago we did debate whether to change them. In the end, we decided to leave them alone, thought there is talk lately about looking at them again.

Since we lack – in fact want nothing to do with – a creed or any settled doctrine of faith, the principles serve the function of describing both the focus and the sensibility of our religion.
They are framed, not as statements of belief or of inerrant truth. Instead, we see them as elements of a covenant, an agreement, that all our member congregations make with one another to "affirm and promote" certain values and ways of being in the world.

We make clear that we didn't just make up these values. They have emerged and continue to emerge from our living tradition's interaction with many different sources of wisdom. And, not least important of those sources is each individual's direct experience of the world.

In my remaining six months with you, I'll be inviting us to give a closer look to these principles and how they guide us. Personally, I still find them compelling, even prophetic, in how they call us to be and to act. And I welcome your feedback on how they touch you as well.

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Today we begin at the very beginning, the first one: we covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

To my mind, this principle appears in the right place. For, as I see it, every other affirmation we care to make depends on our commitment to viewing every person as being fundamentally worthy. It is part of the package, something you didn't earn but were born with. And because of that you are deserving of being treated with dignity.

This is not a concept unique to us. Looking back at our sources we see it reflected across religious traditions. Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Islam – all affirm in their scriptures that people are deserving of care and respect.

But the prominence that we give this principle distinguishes us a bit. My colleague the Rev. Marilyn Sewell writes that this principle makes our religion, in her words, "human-centered. It implies that living on this Earth is the proper focus of our time and attention."
Every person matters. We are ends, not means.

As Rev. Sewell puts it, the first principle "speaks of respecting others enough to never objectify and control them in the service of ideology, however precious. It encourages people to unfold according to their true and authentic nature, to live with integrity according to their own heart's leaning."

Our first principle also leads us naturally to the work of justice. It is a hollow faith that affirms the worth and dignity of every person yet leaves us content to watch others suffer.
For, in the end, as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., one of those prophetic voices our sources direct us to, remarked, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied to a single garment of destiny. . . . Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

But not everyone applauds our First Principle. Some 20 years ago, the sociologist Robert Bellah spoke to our General Assembly. The book that he co-authored, "Habits of the Heart," argued that what it called "an encroaching individualism" was infecting all facets of American life.
And, in speaking to the General Assembly, Bellah cited our First Principle as an example.

That principle, he said, places us in the center of an American culture whose fundamental tenet, he said, is "the sacredness of the individual conscience, the individual person." Individuals certainly merit respect, Bellah said. But if we place individual interests foremost, it poses the danger that we will view it as our duty in life to pursue only that which suits them.

If that's so, then what suits the interests of others, or society at large, is always secondary. And with that move, he says, we lose sight of what he calls the social understanding of human beings and with it any hope for creating true community.

Bellah's critique certainly rings true in the consumer culture we see around us, but I think in the end it misses the mark for Unitarian Universalism. For the same reason that our First Principle points us to the work of justice, it also demands that we take seriously not just what suits us individually but also what promotes the worth and dignity of others.

We begin with the individual, not the larger whole, because it is too easy for individuals to be passed over for the sake of the larger good. We achieve human solidarity by affirming that each human matters. It is a difficult, maybe impossible goal, because, as we see in the world around us, so many people are cast aside, bulldozed over, ignored, oppressed, demeaned.

In such a world, it can be an act of great courage to insist that every person should be treated as if they matter. That doesn't mean we deserve having our whims met. Mick Jagger was right: you can't always get what you want. Over the course of our lives we will be frustrated, deterred, disappointed. The world owes us nothing.

But we owe each other the consideration each of us is due as fellow humans. Our First Principle embraces a prayer that by bringing to bear the best that is in us we can lift ourselves over the strife and hopelessness that washes over the world and awaken a larger hope for beloved community that joins us with all people and inspires us to work for its realization.

I also think Robert Bellah's criticism misses the mark because it ignores an important fact about our First Principle: it is framed in the language of covenant. It is a statement not of our existential independence but about how we as a community have agreed to orient ourselves.
In our gathering, we agree that as a community we will treat each person we encounter as if they matter, as if all people matter.

We understand that simply saying it does not make it so. Rather, it calls us as members of this community to orient ourselves in our lives together and in our larger community in such a way as to make it real. We commit that we will preach it and teach it and live it as best we can.

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Our First Principle was on my mind the other day as I watched the film, "A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood," about the TV star Fred Rogers. The film is centered on a writer for Esquire, a men's magazine with an arch sensibility, who is assigned, against his will, to write a feature story on Mr. Rogers as part of an edition on American heroes.

The character of the writer in the movie, Lloyd Vogel, is not amused. He sees the assignment as a lark, and views Rogers as a simpering fool whose nice persona, he feels, must be an act. Over the course of the movie, though, Vogel learns how mistaken he is and finds his own life transformed by his interactions with Mr. Rogers.

Tom Junod, who you heard from earlier, is the real-life writer who authored the story that appeared on the cover of Esquire in November 1998. I don't know how closely the movie parallels Junod's actual experience, but he certainly makes clear in the article that he was touched by Mr. Rogers.

What is it about Mr. Rogers that touches us? Tom Hanks, the actor who played Rogers in the movie, said in an interview that he watched dozens of tapes of Fred Roger's show in preparation for the part. And he said he was struck that, as he put it, "when you were talking to Fred you felt as though you were the only person in the world that mattered to him."

We see that in the excerpt of Junod's article that you heard earlier. Amid the pandemonium of New York's Penn Station while taping his TV show, Rogers is introduced to a boy carrying a monstrous plastic sword with blinking lights and sound effects under furrowed brows and a pouty disposition.

Rogers filters it all out – the noise, the crowds, the cameras, the little boy pout. He bends on one knee, looks the boy in the eye and says admiringly, "Oh, my that's a big sword you have." The boy won't be bothered, but Rogers stays with him – cameras rolling, nearby children scrambling for his attention – until the boy's eyes turn to him and he declares, "It's not a sword; it's a death ray."

How to respond? A laugh? A lecture? A nod to his handlers to take the kid away? No, he has something to tell the boy, but for his ears only. A quick whisper softens the boy's features, prompts a nod from him, and they move on.

No play to the cameras, no big deal. But what a remarkable thing to say. As Junod quote Rogers: "I just knew that whenever you see a little boy carrying something like that, it means he wants to show people that he's strong on the outside. I just wanted to let him know that he was strong on the inside, too. And that's what I told him. I said, 'Do you know that you're strong on the inside, too?'

"Maybe," Junod quotes Rogers as saying, "it was something he needed to hear." Yeah, maybe.

There is something about hearing that sort of interaction that changes us. The way Junod later described the experience of Fred Rogers is: "my heart felt like a spike, and then . . . it opened like an umbrella." What

changes us, what opens us is something both simple and profoundly complex: it is seeing someone treated as if they really matter. And it stirs a longing within us. It is that longing that Fred Rogers touched, a longing to be seen, to be known as who we are and to know that we are OK.

It's a longing I hear in my mother's poem that I read earlier. She wrote it in January of her 60th year, calling it "Sunrise," an ironic title since it is mostly a meditation on death. Could this be her last sunrise, her last day? None of us ever knows, of course, when that day arrives.
There is a wistfulness to her words, but also a measure of peace.

Because in the end it is not regret or loss that she dwells on but a deep appreciation for the beauty that surrounds her. And it is there that she locates herself: in the beauty of the world, in the shifting pink and gold light of sunrise. Just to be in it is enough.

On this first Sunday of the new year I invite you to locate that longing within yourself and find there the seeds of your own self-knowledge, the genius that is yours, your unique gift to the world. What beauty we possess, what hope. Let us resolve to look at each other with eyes that locate each other as part of the beauty of the world and to live from that wonder.