

# The Demands of Dignity

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

## Readings

### “The Kindness of Lo-Mein” by Kaaren Solveig Anderson

My friend Marcy and her boyfriend Brian  
recently ate dinner at a local Chinese restaurant.

As they enjoyed a plate of lo mein, engrossed in conversation,  
a hand reached down and ushered away their platter of noodles.  
A voice quick and agitated mumbled “Sorry!” and a thin, poorly dressed  
woman left the restaurant with their plate of lo mein.

In astonishment, they watched her walk down the street,  
holding the plate with the flat of her hand  
as she stuffed noodles into her mouth, slapping sharply against her face.

The owner realized what had happened and darted out the front door, chasing  
after the noodle thief.

He stood firmly in front of her,  
blocking her way and grabbing a side of the plate.  
A struggle ensued, noodles slid uneasily from one side to the other, slopping  
over the edge.

He surged forward and pulled with a heroic strong-arm attempt  
to retrieve his plate. The woman’s fingers slid from the plate.  
Noodles flew, then flopped pathetically on the sidewalk.

Left empty-handed, with soggy, contaminated noodles at her feet,  
the woman stood with arms hung dejectedly at her side.  
The owner walked victoriously back to the restaurant  
with the soiled plate in hand.

My friends were given a new heaping plate of lo mein,  
although they had already consumed half of the stolen plate.  
A stream of apology in Chinese came from the proprietor.  
Unable to eat anymore, they asked to have the noodles wrapped up  
and set off to see their movie.

A block later, they happened upon the lo mein thief.  
The woman was hypercharged.  
She simultaneously cried, convulsed, and shouted at a man,  
who rapidly retreated from her side.

My friend, unsure about what to do,  
listened to her boyfriend's plea to just walk away. But she didn't.

Instead, she walked over to the thief and said,  
"Ah, we haven't formally met, but about ten minutes ago,  
you were interested in our noodles.  
They gave us some new ones, are you still hungry?"

The woman nodded and extended her bony arms.  
She took the styrofoam container in her hands,  
bowed ever so slightly, and murmured,  
"Thank you, you're very kind."

### **"Litany" by Langston Hughes**

Gather up, gather up  
In the arms of your pity  
The sick, the depraved,  
The desperate, the tired,  
All the scum of our weary city  
Gather up in the arms of your pity.  
Gather up  
In the arms of your love  
Those who expect  
No love from above.

## Sermon: “The Demands of Dignity”

We weren’t eating lo mein, but we were in a Chinese restaurant.

More than a decade ago, Bob and I were in San Francisco  
having a quick bite at a food court,  
when a young homeless man reached over the short wrought iron fence  
and took food from the plates of the people seated next to us.

There was no struggle, no screaming, no noodles sliding off their plate—  
just the stark and sobering reminder that we live in a world of gross inequality.

The man took what he needed and left as quickly as he had come.  
I can speak for myself, but likely, too, for those around me that day  
in saying that no one’s food tasted quite the same once he was gone.

Our sudden loss of appetite the side-effect of an unexpected confrontation  
with where we find ourselves in this web of inequality.

What was so shocking about the situation  
was that he had, of course, broken the rules.  
He had violated that unspoken code of our common, civic life  
that allows a person to beg but not steal—  
that allows someone to fashion a cardboard sign and hold out a plastic cup  
but not demand the necessities of life from a world of plenty.

After all, it’s just not the way it’s done in polite society,  
where we like to keep charity a choice and dignity optional.

But, seeing the haggard look of desperation on this man’s face—  
it was clear that his grasping for food was a simple act of survival.

He was so profoundly hungry  
that he was willing to sacrifice his own dignity for a handful of food.

I have thought often of this man and that day in the food court.

And, I have thought about how I have known the different sides of the  
proverbial plate, so to speak—  
how I’ve known both the benefits of privilege and relative wealth,  
and how I have also known hunger and wondered

how I would ever stretch \$20 to buy a week's worth of groceries.

One of the most ethically confounding periods of my life played out back in my early 20s.

Working as a waiter and barely getting by,  
I would stand in the restaurant kitchen, shift after shift,  
and scrape plates full of uneaten food into a big gray trash bin.

Setting concern for my own tight circumstances aside, though,  
what disturbed me even more was that after working the lunch shift,  
I would often head out to take a volunteer shift  
at the food bank of the North Dallas Shared Ministries.

In the recession of the early 90s,  
there were times when the cupboards of this food bank were all but bare  
and there was little to offer to those who came seeking  
some measure of sustenance.

I found it difficult in those days  
to navigate the disparity between my work as a waiter  
and the work I did at the food bank—  
in one hand, quite literally, food to be thrown away,  
and in the other, not enough food to give to those in such dire need.

Truth be told, it's a tension I've never been able to resolve:  
why we tolerate the persistence of poverty amid such relative wealth.

Why we can't seem to grasp that a society that denies the dignity of well-being  
to those in need only, and ultimately, diminishes itself.

This to me is one of the enduring truths  
at the heart of Victor Hugo's epic story, *Les Misérables*.

It is a story—whether known through the novel or the musical or both—  
that invites us to wrestle with the over-arching question of justice in the light of  
inequality—that asks: how long must a man be punished  
because he stole a loaf of bread out of desperation?

It's not a question we find hard to answer.

I can't quite imagine anyone, today,  
believing Jean Valjean should have been sentenced to all those years in prison  
because he took a loaf a bread to feed seven starving children.

It offends our modern sense of justice and goes against all  
that seems good and right in this world.

If anything, the real crime, was that Valjean was in such a hopeless position  
that this seemed to be his only recourse.

And, yet, as tempting as it might be to think such dramatic injustices  
simply the stuff of 19<sup>th</sup> century novels,  
we are still a long way off from a world where  
the most basic right of human dignity is guaranteed for all.

While tremendous strides have been made over the past several centuries  
in advancing to an increasing share of the world  
the Enlightenment ideal of dignity as a fundamental human right,  
we are often losing ground  
whenever we fail to address the root causes  
that perpetuate inequalities and undermine dignity in the world around us.

With every day—and especially with every election—we are given the  
opportunity to consider just what kind of world it is that we want to create—  
or to be a bit more specific, what kind of city, what kind of province,  
and what kind of country.

While I appreciate the need for fiscal prudence,  
especially in uncertain economic times,  
I lament the fact that the spending priorities  
of our various levels of government seem to increasingly be  
at such odds with the values I, and I suspect many of you,  
hold as a Unitarian Universalist.

I question continually whether we are really building up a world  
that is more fair and just than the one we know,  
where everyone has equal access to, at least, the necessities of this life.  
I have my doubts, to say the least.  
And, I wrestle with what is required of me and of us  
to build up a world that is in closer alignment with the principles that guide us.

One of the best ways I know to get at this  
is through the children's book, *Is There Really a Human Race?*,  
by the actress Jamie Lee Curtis and Laura Cornell,  
which opens with a series of questions that seem innocent enough:

Is there really a human race?  
Is it going on now all over the place?

When did it start? Who said, "Ready, Set Go?"  
Did it start on my birthday? I really must know.

Do I warm up and stretch? Do I practice and train?  
Do I get my own coach? Do I get my own lane?

Do I race in the snow? Do I race in a twister?  
Am I racing my friends? Am I racing my sister?

If the race is a relay, is Dad on my team?  
And his dad and his dad? You know what I mean.

Is there pushing and shoving to get to the lead?  
If the race is unfair, will I succeed?

Do some of us win? Do some of us lose?  
Is winning or losing something I choose?

Why am I racing? What am I winning?  
Does all of my running keep the world spinning?

And why do I do it, this zillion-yard dash?  
If we don't help each other, we're all going to crash.

Enshrined in the first principle of our Unitarian faith is our covenant  
to affirm and promote "the inherent worth and dignity of every person."

It is and remains a radical statement of deep religious commitment.

It's not something we do easily or consistently,  
which makes it, among our seven principles,  
the one that truly requires the greatest leap of faith on our part.

There has been ongoing debate among Unitarian Universalists theologians as to what such a claim really means.

Many see our first principle as a bold assertion that all people have intrinsic and inviolable value—an inherent worth and dignity that flows from the divine spark found in every person.

Others see worth and dignity as the potential within us all—a potential that has to be developed and honed.

I'm somewhere in the middle.

Every baby I have ever cradled in my arms has reminded me that we come into this world with a value beyond measure. We are not born in original sin, but as our tradition has long affirmed, we are born instead with an original blessing.

We are from the beginning born with inherent worth, and I, for one, believe we hold that value through the years of our life.

Dignity, though, is another matter. I don't see it as being so much an inborn quality or a perpetual state, as much as it is a condition we aspire to in ourselves and we endeavour to impart to others.

Sometimes we sacrifice our dignity, and sometimes we simply squander it.

Sometimes we deny others their dignity, and there are times when we restore the dignity of others in a way they never could on their own.

In his book *Jailbird*, Kurt Vonnegut tells the story of woman who lives on the streets named Mary Kathleen O'Looney.

One day, in a busy city plaza, she spots a long-lost love named Walter.

She surrounds him with all of her shopping bags and takes hold of his wrist and will not let go.

“Now that I've found you,” she says, “I'll never let you go.”

“Look me in the eye, Walter, you used to tell me all the time how much you loved me. But then you went away, and I never heard from you again. Were you just lying to me?”

She refuses to lower her voice.

As Vonnegut says, this kind of melodrama will always draw a crowd. And sure enough, people surround them in the plaza.

The man stood there but could not make a sound.

And then Vonnegut ventures that this unlikely tableau must have represented “a miracle that [that] audience must have prayed for again and again: the rescue of at least one shopping-bag lady by a man who knew her well.”

As the narrator, Walter tells us,  
“Some people were crying,”  
and then he admits that, “I myself was about to cry.”

When a woman in the crowd yelled out: “Hug her,” he did so.

He said he found himself “embracing a bundle of dry twigs that was wrapped in rags. [And,] that was when,” he said, I began to cry myself.”

“Gather up,” Langston Hughes wrote,  
“. . . gather up  
In the arms of your pity  
The sick, the depraved,  
The desperate, the tired,  
All the scum of our weary city  
Gather up in the arms of your pity.  
Gather up  
In the arms of your love  
Those who expect  
No love from above.”

The demands of dignity are a consistent call to compassion.  
A call to bring our best and highest selves to the moments that matter.  
A commitment to call forth the very best in others,  
even if and when they’re off their mark.  
And a willingness to impart honour and respect

when someone is unable to do so for themselves.

To do so is a gift we give to one another and to ourselves  
as we move through this life.

But, here's the all-important caveat:  
dignity isn't something that we merely bestow upon others;  
and it isn't something we can always necessarily summon for ourselves.

There are moments in the course of life's journey,  
when we might well find ourselves standing in desperate need  
of a dignity we cannot conjure on our own.

That is when we must entrust ourselves to the care of others—  
and to this sacred and ongoing dance of our interdependence.

May we then use every day we are given to practice our parts.

The children's book I shared from earlier closes with these words  
with which I leave you:

Shouldn't it be looking back at the end  
That you judge your own race by the help that you lend?  
So, take what's inside you and make big, bold choices.  
And for those who can't speak for themselves, use bold voices.  
And make friends and love well, bring art to this place.  
And make the world better for the whole human race.

So may it be.

Amen.