



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Inherent Worth of All Beings”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

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Centering Thoughts

If you have men who will exclude any of God's creatures from the shelter of compassion and pity, you will have men who will deal likewise with their fellow men. St. Francis of Assisi

By having a reverence for life, we enter into a spiritual relation with the world. By practicing reverence for life we become good, deep, and alive. Albert Schweitzer

The animals of the world exist for their own reasons. They were not made for humans any more than black people were made for white, or women created for men. Alice Walker

Sermon

A number of questions were raised to me recently about our Unitarian Universalist commitment to animal and planetary welfare. Broadly, the issues focused on two subjects: ecologically-sustainable ethical eating and the human exceptionalism underlying the Unitarian Universalist Seven Principles. Also raised were our Fellowship's interest in exploring these issues and how we accommodate people with various answers. This prompted me to do some personal reflection on my own animal-related environmental ethics and whether our UU Principles are too narrowly focused for the 21st century.

Like many subjects I attempt to address on Sunday morning, I can't completely address these questions in one service. I certainly don't have definitive answers to the questions I raise. I know some of you addressed these issues in the Ethical Eating discussion group or on the Green Sanctuary team. Some of you have made life-altering decisions regarding these issues. Today, I hope to expand the conversation more broadly and explore some implications of expanding our First Principle to include beings other than humans.

As you may be aware, the ethical guides we call the Seven Principles, printed on the back cover of your order of service most every week, have appeared in various forms throughout UU history. Earlier statements developed as an alternative to professions of faith or creedal affirmations required for congregational membership. Not surprisingly, our free faith tradition moved away from this practice, though not without healthy debate.

This shift led to the common use of covenantal statements. You can find several examples in the Readings section of the gray hymnal. The Unison Reading we often recite after lighting the

chalice is a variation of these. It summarizes our promises to each other and our purpose for being in community.

In preparation for the Unitarian and Universalist denominational merger in 1961, an early version of the Principles was developed. It identified what the two groups agreed on, thus facilitating consolidation. But somewhat unexpectedly they filled a need to articulate to the world, and ourselves, what we believe rather than what we don't. This unsatisfactory response to the question "What do UUs believe?" was more common until the Principles provided a positive reply.

The Seven Principles were finalized in 1984 and though they were reviewed about ten years ago, they were not changed, although the Sources were revised in 1995 to add a sixth, earth-centered source.

Besides stating what we hold in common, the Principles serve as an ethical guide for our behavior. They articulate what we value, such as freedom and democracy, as well as how we aspire to live, such as with compassion and respect for all. We lift up or call attention to these ideals and values each week in our Sunday Forum and Worship services. We ascribe worth to them, forming the basis of our worship. A deity may or may not be invoked for it to still be worship. The Seven Principles are not gods or idols any more than they are doctrine, but I think we humble ourselves before them by the fact that we try to live up to them as best we can. At the least, they are that which is greater than our own self-interest.

The First Principle affirms 'the inherent worth and dignity of every person.' I believe this particular principle gives many people the most trouble. For some, it is much easier to say the words than to act accordingly. We gossip, we criticize, and we dismiss individuals and groups for a variety of reasons that are disrespectful. Certain religious beliefs and political persuasions challenge us the most, me included. Also, for some, every person does not have inherent worth and some don't need to be treated with respect. Some may believe terrorists, murderers, and other violent criminals, for example, have lost the right to respect or dignified treatment.

For me, the consequences of not believing the First Principle applies to all persons, whether they are of good character or not, creates a slippery ethical slope – one that might lead to justifying torture, enslavement, death, indiscriminate killing in war, or even turning a blind eye to a wide range of human suffering.

Challenging as it may be, the First Principle advocating exemplary human relations might become even more challenging if it were changed.

Most people interpret 'every person' to mean human persons. The definition of a person can mean an individual of any species, but that's not its most common usage. Since six of the seven are human-centric in focus, the First Principle probably wasn't intended more broadly. The Seventh Principle does go beyond humanity by naming 'the interdependent web of all existence', which is a bit like saying 'everything not human, including the kitchen sink.' We know it to include animals and plants, but plants aren't sentient beings that think or feel pain and suffering. It also doesn't ascribe equal or even near-equal worth to non-human life or sentient beings.

And that presents us with a challenge or an opportunity: should the First Principle be changed to explicitly include *all beings*? Even if it weren't changed, should we *interpret* the First Principle to include animals? And, if we did, what would it mean? How might we need to change?

The First Principle Project is a UU grassroots movement raising these questions. The move is prompted by a concern for the planet's future due to the ecological harm caused by meat-based diets, by a concern for the inhumane treatment of food-source animals, and by a concern that humans have no inherent right to treat other sentient beings as resources for human use, consumption, or amusement. If we believe animals truly are our relations with equal moral worth to humans, then many of us will need to alter our behavior.

The first two of these concerns are factual issues I doubt many of us would argue. Agribusiness threatens crop diversity, damages and pollutes land and water, contributes to the loss of forested land, and increases the effects of global climate change. Animal abuses in the poultry and cattle industries are well documented; overfishing in our oceans is depleting populations and fish-farming is highly polluting. We currently try to hold these industries accountable and require better standards and treatments, but efficiency and economic drivers resist such efforts.

The latter two concerns (inhumane treatment and rights of animals) are moral issues. As an institution that purports to consider moral issues, this topic and these concerns should have a place in our personal reflections, our joint discussions, and perhaps changes in our behavior. Our answers may not agree, but I believe we should hold the conversations. And, we need to consider to what extent our views, whether in the minority or majority, should impact our practices when we are together.

I think we might agree that we all want animals treated humanely, meaning without undue pain and suffering. We have laws that criminalize animal fighting and neglect, and discourage practices like 'puppy mills'. Standards exist for appropriate treatment of food animals, though the bar is set too low and even that is met with great difficulty.

But is it okay to use animals in medical experiments that cause pain or suffering? Is saving human lives adequate moral justification? If so, are we indicating animals are a thing, a resource, property to use as we wish? Do the ends justify the means? Would we do that to humans?

We might agree inhumane treatment for human amusement is not sufficient. It's why we object to activities like dog and cock fighting. But should we also object to marine mammals being kept in Sea World-type aquariums, land animals in city zoos, young calves in rodeos, or elephants in circuses, for example? Does the possible educational value justify removing animals from the wild? Is it a justifiable, greater good to keep some in captivity in the hope that it will result in saving more wild animals? I'm not including rescued injured or orphaned animals that might otherwise die in the wild, but even that creates a challenge proving the animal was legitimately rescued.

I think we need to identify our beliefs, our theological basis, to help us decide whether or not animals are due the same moral consideration as humans. Some religions justify treating animals as less than human because they believe animals have no soul and therefore no eternal

life. Some religions teach that humans were given animals for our explicit use, given dominion over the fish, the birds, the cattle, and all the wild animals of the earth, including every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth, as Genesis says. In contrast, other religions suggest through reincarnation that animals are equal to humans, just dealing with karma at a different level. While yet another religion suggests we all sentient beings have Buddha-nature, or the ability to reach enlightenment, and therefore should be treated equally with humans.

What does your theology instruct you about your relationship to animals?

Mine tells me we're all lucky accidents blessed with life. And I am no more special than an elephant, whale, or a woodpecker. I'm just human. And if I am interconnected and interdependent with all that exists, then I am certainly in kinship with animals. The fact that my cognitive skills are greater than animals does not make me morally superior to animals.

Even without this theology, it is enough that science tells me animals experience pain and suffering, therefore it follows that my right action must be to treat animals as I treat humans, with care for their pain and suffering. And I'm not doing that consistently now.

I need to figure out how to change my habits. I need to identify what steps I can take to move my actions into better alignment with my beliefs. That likely means reducing or eliminating food that comes from inhumane or environmentally harmful sources. This won't be easy for me. I like meat. I like eggs. I don't pay attention to what personal or household products I use that came to market because some animal was made to suffer. It's likely my cancer-killing drugs were first used on lab rats. Leather I can give up, but what do I do with what I already own?

I know I'm a work in progress on these issues, but I'm closer to change than I was before.

How about you? What theological, philosophical, or moral principles guide your behavior towards animals? What guides your consideration of other humans who have made a commitment to go vegan? Should we accommodate that commitment by not serving meat or dairy products at Fellowship events? How far should we go to accommodate our differences?

I have lots of questions. don't have definitive answers. But I think we should be asking these questions. What would it mean to grant all beings inherent worth and dignity?

I hope you'll join me in the conversation. May it be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Do you believe every sentient (thinking or feeling) creature has inherent worth and dignity? How does your view impact your behavior?
2. How do animals affect or contribute to your spiritual life or well-being?
3. Do you believe a moral equivalency exists between the value of animal lives and human lives? Does extending equivalency to animals diminish human dignity? Share.
4. Should humans treat companion animals differently from food-source animals? Explain.
5. How does being part of an interdependent web affect our relationships with other creatures?